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FOREWORD BY *Julia Bradbury*

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CHALLENGE YOURSELF PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY

Digital Edition

FUTURE

THIRD EDITION

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A R C T I C
O C E A N
Newman B. Land
Petermann Fd.
Washington Ld.
Greely Fd.
Hayes S.
Smith Sound
Smith Ch.
Hayes Pena.
Iteplik
N. Cornwall
Pr. Patrick I.
Parry Isles
N. Lincoln
Jones Sound
Melville I.
Bathurst I.
N. Devon
Baffin Bay
Banks Str.
Melville Sound
Pr. of Wales I.
Nth. Somerset
Lancaster Sd.
Admiralty Inlet
Eclipse Sd.
Upernavik
GREENLAND
Emp. William Ld.
C. Bismarck
Koldewey Is.
Shannon I.
Emp. Francis Joseph Fd.
Scoresby Land
Jan Mayen
Banks Land
Pr. Albert Ld.
McClintock Chan.
G. of Boothia
Boothia
Victoria Ld.
Baffin Land
Omenak Fd.
Disko
Davis Strait
Pt. Barrow
C. Bathurst
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Behring Strait
East C.
C. Pr. of Wales
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Yucon
Unalachleet
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Behring Sea
NORTH DOMINION OF CANADA
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L. Garry
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Fox Chan.
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Frobisher B.
Hudson Str.
Godthaab
Julianshaab
C. Farewell
Arctic Circle
Iceland
Reykiavik
Faroe Is.
Leith to Iceland 1050 m.
Shetland Is.
Orkney Is.
Hebrides
Scotland
BRITISH ISLES
Glasgow
Ireland
Dublin
England
Cork
London
English Chan.
Mt. St. Elias
Mt. Fairweather
Cook Inlet
Kodiak I.
Alaska Pena.
Aleutian Is.
Sitka
Grt. Slave L.
L. Athabasca
Hudson Bay
Labrador Penina.
Main
Nelson R.
York Factory
Rocky Mountains
Saskatchewan
L. Winnipeg
Winnipeg
Qn. Charlotte Is.
British Columbia
Vancouver I.
Vancouver
Victoria
L. Superior
Duluth
Missouri
St. Paul
L. Michigan
L. Huron
L. Ontario
Ottawa
Montreal
Quebec
G. of St. Lawrence
R. St. Lawrence
Str. of Belle Isle
Newfoundland
St. Johns
C. Race
St. Pierre
Cape Breton I.
Halifax
Nova Scotia
Portland
Boston
Quebec to Glasgow 2560 m.
Glasgow to New York 2790 m.
Cable 1865
Cable 1866
New York to Liverpool 3025 m.
Cable 1869
Nantes
B. of Biscay
New Route to Far East 5200 m.
Yokohama to Victoria 4320 m.
R. Columbia
Portland
Salt Lake City
Omaha
Chicago
L. Erie
UNITED STATES
C. Mendocino
California
Colorado
St. Louis
Cincinnati
Alleghany Mts.
New York
Philadelphia
Washington
New York to New Orleans 4500 m. via Havana
Barcelona
Oporto
Madrid
Portugal
SPAIN
Lisbon
Gibraltar
Yokohama to S. Francisco 4500 m.
San Francisco
Arkansas
Mississippi
Southampton to New Orleans
Azores
C. Hatteras
Charleston
Bermudas
Fez
Madeira
Morocco
MOROCCO
Texas
Mobile
San Diego
R. Bravo
New Orleans
Florida
Bahama Is.
Australasia 6760 m.
2060 m.
Acapulco 1856 m.
Lr. California
Matamoras
G. of Mexico
MEXICO
Southampton to Aspinwall 4000 m.
London to Demerara 4260 m.
Canary Is.
Tropic of Cancer
Sahara
Sandwich Is.
Honolulu
Hawaii
C. San Lucas
Revillagigedo Is.
Tampico
Vera Cruz
Havana
Cuba
Yucatan
WEST INDIES
Hayti
Porto Rico
St. Thomas
Little Antilles
C. Blanco
Timbuctu
Senegal
Mexico
Acapulco
Belize
Jamaica
Truxillo
Caribbean Sea
Cape Verd Is.
C. Verd
Bathurst
Soudan
P A C I F I C
New Route to Honolulu 2815 m.
Guatemala
Aspinwall
Maracaibo
Barbadoes
Trinidad
R. Orinoco
CENTRAL AMERICA
Panama
1290 m.
Caracas
VENEZUELA
Cartagena
Demerara
Paramaribo
Guiana
Cayenne
Southampton to Monte Video 5535 m.
Sierra Leone
GUINEA
Coomassie
Monrovia
Cape Coast Castle
Fanning I.
Christmas I.
Equator
Galapagos Is.
COLOMBIA
Bogota
Quito
R. Negro
Macopa
Marajo I.
Maranhao
Para
Guayaquil
EQUADOR
Marañon
R. Amazon
C. St. Roque
Pernambuco
Ascension
St. Paul
Phœnix Is.
POLYNESIA
Marquesas Is.
Penrhyn Is.
Panama Route 6160 m.
Payta
Truxillo
Ucayali
Madeira
SOUTH AMERICA
BRAZIL
Therezina
R. S. Francisco
Bahia
Plymouth to Cape Town
St. Helena
Auckland to Honolulu
Samoa Is.
Society Is.
Tahiti
Low Archipelago
Callao
PERU
Lima
L. Titicaca
Matto Grosso
Friendly Is.
Cook Is.
Yslay
Arica
Iquique
Cobija
BOLIVIA
Sucre
Ouro Preto
Porto Seguro
Tongatabu
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Ducie
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Concepcion
Buenos Ayres
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C. Corrientes
Tristan da Cunha Is.
Gough I.
Valdivia
Bahia Blanca
Ancud
G. of San Matias
Patagonia
Valparaiso to Monte Video 2743 m.
G. of St. George
C. Horn to Southampton
Wellington
Chatham Is.
Str. of Magellan
Falkland Is.
Tierra del Fuego
Staten I.
S. Georgia
Melbourne to London 13,310 m.
C. Horn
Sandwich Group
Bouvet I.
A T L A N T I C
O C E A N
G R E A T

Welcome

There's something special about exploring a place on foot – not only do you get to experience things that simply wouldn't be possible if you were in a car or on a plane, but walking provides an abundance of benefits for the mind, body and soul. It offers adventure while also providing an opportunity to slow down and switch off; it enables you to face fears and overcome challenges – both mental and physical ones – and it gives you an extraordinary sense of freedom. Not only that, walking allows you to get close to nature and appreciate Planet Earth in all its glory, from grand geological features and iconic natural wonders to unique flora and fauna.

World's Greatest Hikes showcases the most incredible hiking trails from around the globe. Whether you fancy a short day-hike with breathtaking views, or an epic adventure that lasts for several weeks or even months, there are routes to suit all abilities and bucket lists. From coastal paths to rugged mountains, tropical jungles to ancient pilgrimages – check out itineraries and essential travel information, such as when to go, how to get there, what to take and where to stay. Discover historical places of interest, beauty spots, maps of the trails and much more. We've even included a guide on how to plan a hike, what to consider and how to stay safe, as well as a checklist and essential kit list.

There's a whole world out there, waiting to be explored. The hardest decision you have to make is where to go first!

BACKPACK
1954
HIKING
CLUB

FUTURE

WORLD'S GREATEST HIKES

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Cover images
Getty Images & Twofour

Photography
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Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk – for enquiries, please email
mfcommunications@futurenet.com

World's Greatest Hikes Third Edition (LBZ5321)
© 2023 Future Publishing Limited

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Future plc is a public
company quoted on the
London Stock Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

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FOREWORD

By Julia Bradbury

"Travel isn't always pretty. It isn't always comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart. But that's okay. The journey changes you; it should change you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart, and on your body. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind."

Anthony Bourdain – chef, writer, traveller

ABOUT JULIA

Television presenter and walking legend **Julia Bradbury** has dedicated her career to sharing breathtaking walks from all over the world, in particular in the UK. From BBC1's *Countryfile* to *Britain's Best Walks*, Julia's passion for nature and the environment combined with her love of walking and travel is infectious, and she continues to highlight the many physical and mental benefits of walking.

Julia lives in England and co-founded The Outdoor Guide (TOG) in 2010, an online resource and space for walks all around the UK. Visit **theoutdoorguide.co.uk** for more information, from routes and accommodation to gear and clothing.

© Photo: Twofour; Illustrations: Getty Images

The well-documented benefits of walking are in abundance; from improving your cardiovascular health to relieving the symptoms of anxiety and depression. It's even been claimed that it can prolong your life as well as slow down the ageing process.

Aren't those last two the same thing? Well, that is one of the many philosophical questions you can ask yourself on a great hike, because another thing that walking does is promote thinking by creating new connections between brain cells. All the great philosophers of our time extoll the virtues of thinking and walking.

Henry David Thoreau and Friedrich Nietzsche both claimed that their greatest thoughts were conceived while walking, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau went as far as to say he couldn't work, or even think, when he wasn't walking. The word 'peripatetic' is a translation of the ancient Greek word 'peripatētikós', which means 'of walking', and Aristotle founded the Peripatetic school on the back of it, where he'd lecture his students while they walked.

The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking. The foot's impact during walking sends pressure waves through the arteries that significantly modify and can increase the supply of blood to the brain. Perhaps that's why Henry David Thoreau wrote in his walking manifesto (*Walking*, also known as *The Wild* – a lecture Thoreau first delivered in 1851) that "every walk is a sort of crusade."

As you've picked up this bookazine, I'm hopeful that you're not just interested in meandering around a park – nothing wrong with that, by the way – but rather you're looking for a more challenging and inspiring experience, perhaps to fulfil a spiritual endeavour through enriching and exciting landscapes. A pilgrimage if you will.

The Pilgrimage by Paulo Coelho single-handedly reinvigorated public interest in the

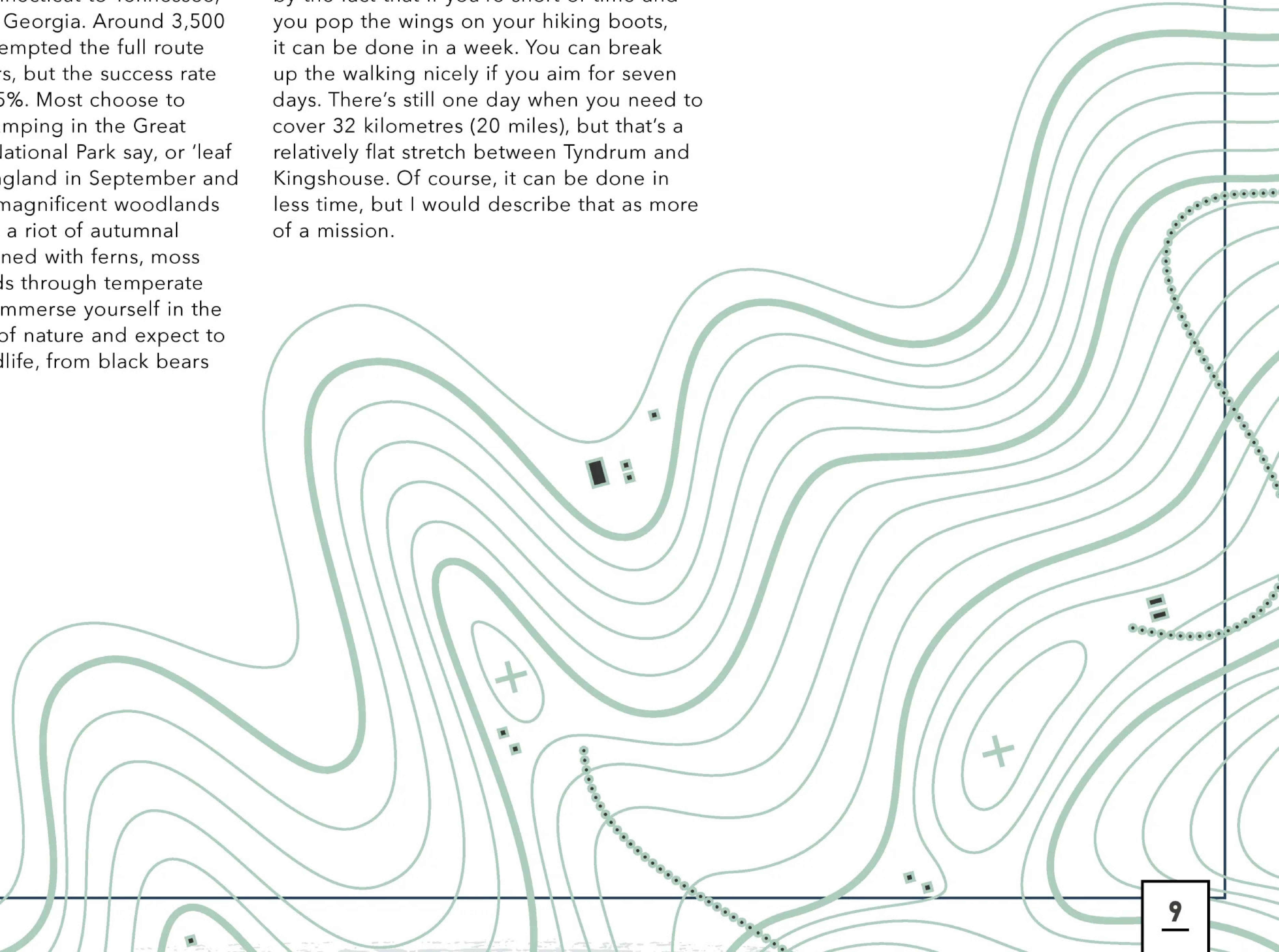
Camino de Santiago (see pages 56-57) in the 1980s. This network of routes through northern Spain (also known as the Way of St James) attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, who endeavour to find their way to the burial site of the apostle Saint James. It's one of the most important Christian pilgrimages in the world, but hordes of people tread this ancient trail to rediscover themselves, not to explore religion. This has become a well-trodden path for tourists, hikers and pilgrims. "Buen Camino!" ('good road') will be the two Spanish words you'll hear time and time again on this epic journey.

If you attempt the entire 3,529 kilometres (2,193 miles) of the Appalachian Trail (see pages 28-29) in the USA, you'll need to be extremely fit and have a spare six months in your backpack. This stunning long-distance hike cuts along the entire east coast, taking in 14 states from Maine, New Hampshire and Connecticut to Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia. Around 3,500 thru-hikers have attempted the full route in the past few years, but the success rate has been around 25%. Most choose to take on sections, camping in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park say, or 'leaf peeping' in New England in September and October when the magnificent woodlands shed their leaves in a riot of autumnal colour. The trail is lined with ferns, moss and fungi, and winds through temperate coniferous forests. Immerse yourself in the smells and sounds of nature and expect to see a variety of wildlife, from black bears to boomer squirrels. This is a trail that will leave you changed.

"Wherever I wander, wherever I rove / The hills of the Highlands for ever I love." So said Robert Burns in *My Heart's in the Highlands*, and when it comes to stunning scenery, the West Highlands offer some of the best in Britain (see pages 62-63). Dramatic mountain ranges, idyllic lochs and stunning panoramic views await you on the 154-kilometre (96-mile) West Highland Way. Following historic drovers' roads and military passes, this famous trail takes you through some of the most beautiful and varied scenery Scotland has to offer. You'll pass through ancient woodland, skirt around the shores of Loch Lomond, and hear the words of Burns echo in your head as you stare at the rugged peaks of Highland mountains, heading towards Fort William from Milngavie. More than 100,000 people hike the West Highland Way each year, attracted by the fact that if you're short of time and you pop the wings on your hiking boots, it can be done in a week. You can break up the walking nicely if you aim for seven days. There's still one day when you need to cover 32 kilometres (20 miles), but that's a relatively flat stretch between Tyndrum and Kingshouse. Of course, it can be done in less time, but I would describe that as more of a mission.

There are more than 70 dazzling hikes in this bookazine that take you across the world. I truly believe that the best way to get a feel for a place and to understand its rhythm and soul is on foot. But walking also has the capacity to build camaraderie with friends and to create a form of intimacy with oneself. We live such busy, connected, switched-on lives, that I think it's easy to believe that travel is less important than arrival. Modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness. We all need thoughts, and time to think them. What better way to do it? As the artist Maira Kalman says: "Go out and walk. That is the glory of life."

Julia



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GETTING OUT THERE

WHY DO WE HIKE?

The great outdoors is good for the body, mind and soul

What is it about hiking that keeps drawing you to the trails? Is it the physical challenge, the freedom, the experience or the unpredictability? The answer is probably a combination of all these things, and more.

One of the greatest things about hiking is its accessibility. With even the most basic level of fitness and a sturdy pair of boots, you can go for a hike from your own front door or within a short drive. No matter where you are in the world, there are parks, towpaths, rights of way, bridle paths, peaks, mountain ranges, woodland, forests and heathland to explore. It doesn't always have to be a huge multi-day adventure; even the shortest, most local of hikes can deliver huge benefits.

The simplicity of hiking is part of its appeal. Walking is something most of us are able to do, and hiking is an extension of that. It takes a skill we use every day to get from place to place, and elevates it. The more you hike, the more your confidence, strength and stamina will grow, giving you the tools you need to move to more technical routes. Age and ability are no barrier with this sport – you might have to adapt your hikes, your routes or your pace over time, but you can feasibly hike for the rest of your active life.

EXPLORATION

Hiking gives us the chance to experience parts of the world we'd otherwise never get to see. Many tracks go off the beaten route, away from busy cities, and are inaccessible to cars. From these trails, we can view the world from another perspective, and spend time soaking up the simple pleasures available to us outdoors. In a modern world that is saturated with noise and technology, being out in nature offers peace and a welcome distraction.

Thanks to the ever-changing seasons, the same trail can be very different from one day to the next. Our regular routes can constantly surprise us, keep us guessing and making us long to go back time and time again. And then there is the thrill of walking somewhere new, whether that's an undiscovered path not far from home, or a planned trip to walk some of the greatest trails in the world.

A HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE

Hiking offers us so many benefits, both physical and mental. Walking across varying terrain is great exercise. It's low impact, but still challenging. Using walking poles helps to work the upper body, while our lower body is strengthened through load bearing. Our core has to work hard to keep us stable, while the inclines and declines can raise our heart rate for a cardiovascular boost. Many people start hiking to aid their fitness, and continuing to walk on a regular basis can help you to maintain a healthy, strong body.

For others, however, the mental benefits far outweigh the physical. Spending time in nature is known to help lower stress levels, reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, and increase self-confidence. When the world feels too much, there is something soothing about being outside, away from the daily grind and disconnected from our phones, emails and social media. Being away from all of that can also give us the opportunity to think – really think. It gives us the mental space to address issues in our lives, tackle problems we're facing, and come up with solutions.

SATISFACTION

Achievements can bring happiness, so setting goals, such as a long-distance hike you really want to do, can help boost your motivation. That feeling of facing, and ultimately conquering, anything you set your mind to is empowering. And because there are so many amazing places to hike around the globe, the number of possible challenges you can take on in your lifetime is almost limitless. Even if you are on a budget, there are enough options to hike throughout your own country that can see you through many years of accomplishment.

Hiking also helps to challenge our adaptability and problem-solving skills. If you're on a long-distance hike, you need to be prepared for anything. But eventually, we'll all face a situation that is new to us, something that we haven't already prepared for. We are forced to think on our feet, adapt and thrive – all key skills that will carry over into so many other areas of our lives. You might leave on a big hike as one person and come back quite another, after facing fears and challenges you might never have thought yourself capable of overcoming.

So, take some time to consider what it is that you really love about hiking and why you do it. Examining your reasons and understanding exactly what you get out of hiking will motivate you and inspire you to get planning that next big hike.

3 KEY BENEFITS OF HIKING

Delve a little deeper into some of the top physical, social and mental rewards

IT'S GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

You can burn up to 400 calories an hour hiking on varied terrain at a moderate pace. Not only that, hiking works your calves, hips, hamstrings, glutes, quadriceps and core. As a weight-bearing exercise, it helps to maintain bone density, and by raising your heart rate, it helps to improve your blood pressure and stabilise blood sugar levels. There's also a lower risk of injury than in other sports.

IT CAN PROVIDE A GREAT BONDING EXPERIENCE

While many of us might opt to hike alone, hiking with others is a sensible idea for safety reasons. As well as that, it is a good opportunity to bond, away from the noise and busyness of everyday life. You will need to work together to check maps, plan ahead and look out for each other. There are local hiking groups in many areas if you're keen to harness the social element of the sport.

YOU MIGHT SLEEP BETTER

Quality sleep can have a huge impact on our health and wellbeing. A good hike can help you to get that higher sleep quality, by physically working your body to fatigue. It also helps you melt away stress and clear your mind, both of which can otherwise be barriers to a good night's sleep. Being exposed to natural daylight also helps to regulate your internal body clock.

© Alamy | Words: Julie Bassett

PLAN YOUR NEXT HIKE

Everything you need to know to prepare for a successful trip

No matter how far you want to hike, whether it's close to home, or further afield, for one day or many days, there will be some planning you need to do to ensure your hike is both successful and safe. This is especially true when you're planning a hike that will take you on unfamiliar trails and paths, and even more so if you're going abroad to take on a multi-day hike.

But that doesn't mean you can get away with no planning when you're only going out for a day in an area you know well. Conditions can change rapidly in nature, so you should always undertake basic checks at least the day before you plan on setting off. The planning stage of any hike will take longer depending on the complexity of your hiking adventure. And anyway, planning is part of the fun of the whole experience, as it includes anticipation of what's to come.

WHERE TO HIKE

Right at the start of your planning you need to think about where you want to go for your hike. This helps to set the scope and scale of your trip. This could be as simple as identifying an area in your home country you've not yet explored, or taking a good look at a world globe and picking a country you really want to visit.

Once you have narrowed down the location of your hike, you can start to think about timescales. If you want to plan a big hiking trip, you'll need to think about when is a good time to go and the logistics involved, such as flights or other transport, booking time off work, and budget. For smaller, more local hikes, consider when would be the best time to go in terms of your lifestyle and the outside conditions.

Researching your chosen location will help you to narrow down the exact trails you want to traverse. It's pretty rare to find an area that has no waymarked trails or footpaths at all, particularly in the most popular hiking destinations. You can do a lot of research online, especially reading blogs and reviews from other hikers who have already explored the area you're interested in. This can give you a lot of insider info on the best places to go, where to stay, and what lies ahead on the trail. You should also check the websites of any national bodies, such as National Trails in the UK or the US National Park Service, which might include useful advice about the area.

You can then get down to the nitty gritty of actually planning your route. It helps to have a physical map of the region in front of you, but it's useful to use a digital online mapping tool as well. The advantage of using an online service is you can then download the GPX mapping data to a

From weather to wildlife, make sure you know what to expect from your route

Consider whether you will need to use public transport to get to the start of a hike

BEST PLANNING TOOLS

These handy websites offer planning tools and resources

WWW.OUTDOORACTIVE.COM
This online tool is free to use to access the 'Basic' features. This lets you plan, save, print and navigate routes anywhere in the world. You can rate and comment on your routes, and see other people's comments on things such as huts and lodgings. You can also download the GPX data. Pro features start from €2.50 (£2.20 / $2.70) a month, and there is also a free trial.

WWW.KOMOOT.COM
Komoot offers more than just maps. If you need it, it can even offer turn-by-turn voice navigation, as well as the ability to save your whole planned hike offline so you can access it without any signal. You pay to access different regions, then you can plan your whole hike with the advanced mapping tools. You get one single region free when you sign up, and it costs £3.99 ($5) for an additional region, up to £29.99 ($37) for the whole world.

WWW.WANDERMAP.NET
Wandermap is a great tool for finding routes used by other hikers. Anyone can upload a route and leave information about the terrain, distance and vertical gain; other users can then rate the routes if they try them. You can get descriptions and photos of some routes where users have uploaded them. There are official routes listed too, but sometimes you can't beat fellow hikers for insider knowledge.

> "IT'S WORTH HAVING A MARKED PAPER MAP TOO – TECHNOLOGY CAN AND DOES FAIL"

handheld GPS device. This will help keep you on track when you're walking, but it's always worth having a marked paper map too – technology can and does fail from time to time.

With your route decided, you can think about how long it's likely to take you. You need to add in some contingency on timings in case anything does go wrong, and if you're going with others, plan your timings around the speed of the whole group. Bad weather conditions, for example, can limit the amount of ground you can cover in a day. On longer hikes, think about where your checkpoints will be and where you will shelter overnight. This might be in a tent you're carrying with you, in hiking huts or lodgings directly on the route, or in booked accommodation close to the trails.

If your hike is point to point, you'll need to consider the logistics of how you're going to get to your start point and then how you will get back from the end. Or if you want to try a loop route, find out whether there is parking, or public transport that will drop you off close by.

RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH

By now you have an itinerary, a route and the logistics worked out. It's time to start thinking about the physical aspects of the hike itself. One of the most important things to check is the expected conditions you'll

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THE CHECKLIST

Make sure you go through this checklist before you embark on any hike

1

Choose where you want to hike and locate a suitable hiking trail. Read reviews by people who have hiked it.

2

Plan your route and locate potential pit stops, along with rough timings for each stage of the route.

3

Plan your journey to the start point, and back from the finish point if needed.

4

Check the temperature you can expect throughout your trip and pack accordingly, including sun protection.

5

Check potential rainfall levels. Pack accordingly so you don't have to spend all day in wet clothes.

6

Look at the sunrise and sunset times so you don't get caught out in the dark.

7

Survey the ground and terrain you will be covering, and make sure you have appropriate footwear.

8

See if there are any sources of water on your route, in case you need to fill up.

9

Do your research on the location – are there any natural elements or wildlife you need to know about?

10

Make a detailed packing list of everything you need for your trip, based on all your above research.

Ensuring you have the right gear and suitable footwear is essential

be hiking in. Weather forecasts are handy, but not always 100% accurate. It's a good idea to look at the average temperatures and rainfall in your chosen destination for the time of year, to give you an idea of what to expect.

Temperature is a really important consideration, and will have a big impact on what you choose to pack. Hot sunshine can be draining, as well as leave you open to the risk of heatstroke and sunburn. Snow and ice can make the going very tough, and it can be harder to breathe in cold conditions. Bear in mind that if you're hiking in the mountains, the altitude affects the temperature – it will get colder the higher you climb. Check the data for your hike carefully and make sure you pack for this.

Similarly, check for rainfall and try to plan your hike for a time of year that doesn't usually see heavy rainfall. Wet ground can be much harder to walk on, and the risk of injury increases. Also, if you get very wet early on, you'll find it harder to control your body temperature. Be sure to have good waterproofs with you, as well as spare clothes that you can change into.

Another bit of research to do is to look at the sunrise and sunset times; this will give you an idea of how long your day will be out on the trails. From a safety point of view, it means that you can plan your hike to finish before it gets too dark. From an experience point of view, however, you can also plan to be in a stunning location just in time to see the sun rise or set, which will be a memory you'll never forget.

UNDERSTAND THE TRAIL

You also need to do your research on the trail you plan to walk. What kind of ground will you be covering? What is the terrain like? This will help inform your decisions when it comes to deciding what to wear. You need to have the right shoes for the right conditions, and you might need to consider gaiters if you'll be walking across gravel or sandy paths.

If you're hiking a more technical or advanced route in winter, you might need crampons or snowshoes to give you extra grip on the path and to prevent falls. You might also need an ice axe in extreme conditions to help break a fall. If your route has a lot of climbs, you will want to consider lightweight walking poles to help you traverse the landscape safely and preserve your energy levels.

Some trails will have access to clean sources of water too, such as springs. You can find this information online, and it's invaluable if you're hiking long distances. Carry water purification tablets and you can be sure you'll always get a refill before you need it.

Check the natural landscape too, so you know what to expect and if there are any specific risks in the area you are planning to walk in. This could be anything from landslips to wild animals – the better you get to know an area, the more prepared you will be when you get there.

Are you feeling ready for your next hike? Read up on the hikes in this guide, pick one that appeals to you, and start planning!

© Getty Images

ESSENTIAL KIT

Make sure you have all the right gear for a successful hike

USEFUL EXTRAS

As well as the essentials, it's worth considering the following items too

SUNSCREEN AND SUNGLASSES

WALKING POLES

SPARE BATTERIES AND/OR A PORTABLE CHARGER

SPARE SOCKS

EXTRA LAYERS OF CLOTHING

MUSIC PLAYER AND HEADPHONES

WARM HAT

SPACE BLANKET

BASIC REPAIR KIT

JOURNAL AND PEN

WALKING SHOES OR BOOTS

The right shoes are an absolute must. They should be comfortable, with plenty of room for thick socks and for your feet to expand as you trek. Boots can give you more support around the ankle, but shoes are lighter and more flexible. They should be waterproof with a good grip on the sole. Ideally, try a few pairs on in an outdoor shop so you can get some advice on what's right for your plans.

ENOUGH WATER AND FOOD

Always make sure you have enough food and water for your planned journey, plus some extra. Ideally you want food that has a long shelf life and doesn't need cooking, in case of emergencies, on top of your normal food. Things that are calorie dense but light to carry are great, such as dried fruit, nuts and energy bars. As well as carrying water, if you're on a long hike, water purifying tablets could help you to source more along the way.

FIRST-AID KIT

Never go anywhere without a properly stocked first-aid kit. If an accident happens, you could be miles from anywhere and you need to know how to treat minor ailments yourself. This should include blister plasters, normal plasters, bandages, disinfectant, paracetamol, sterile eye wash, scissors, tweezers, adhesive tape and anything else that might be essential for you, such as an inhaler or personal medication.

PEN KNIFE

A small, sharp knife can come in handy in lots of different ways. It can help if you need to repair something, for example, and be used to cut bandages to the right size. If you need to open packets or cut up food, a knife can come in handy then too. You could pack a basic flick-out knife, or you might find a multi-purpose tool that has numerous other attachments even more useful.

HEAD TORCH

If your walk goes on longer than planned, or you stray from the path, it might get dark faster than you realise. Always carry a head torch, even if you're planning to be back long before night, and make sure it's charged. Head torches keep your hands free while lighting the way, which is essential for your own stability.

MATCHES OR LIGHTER

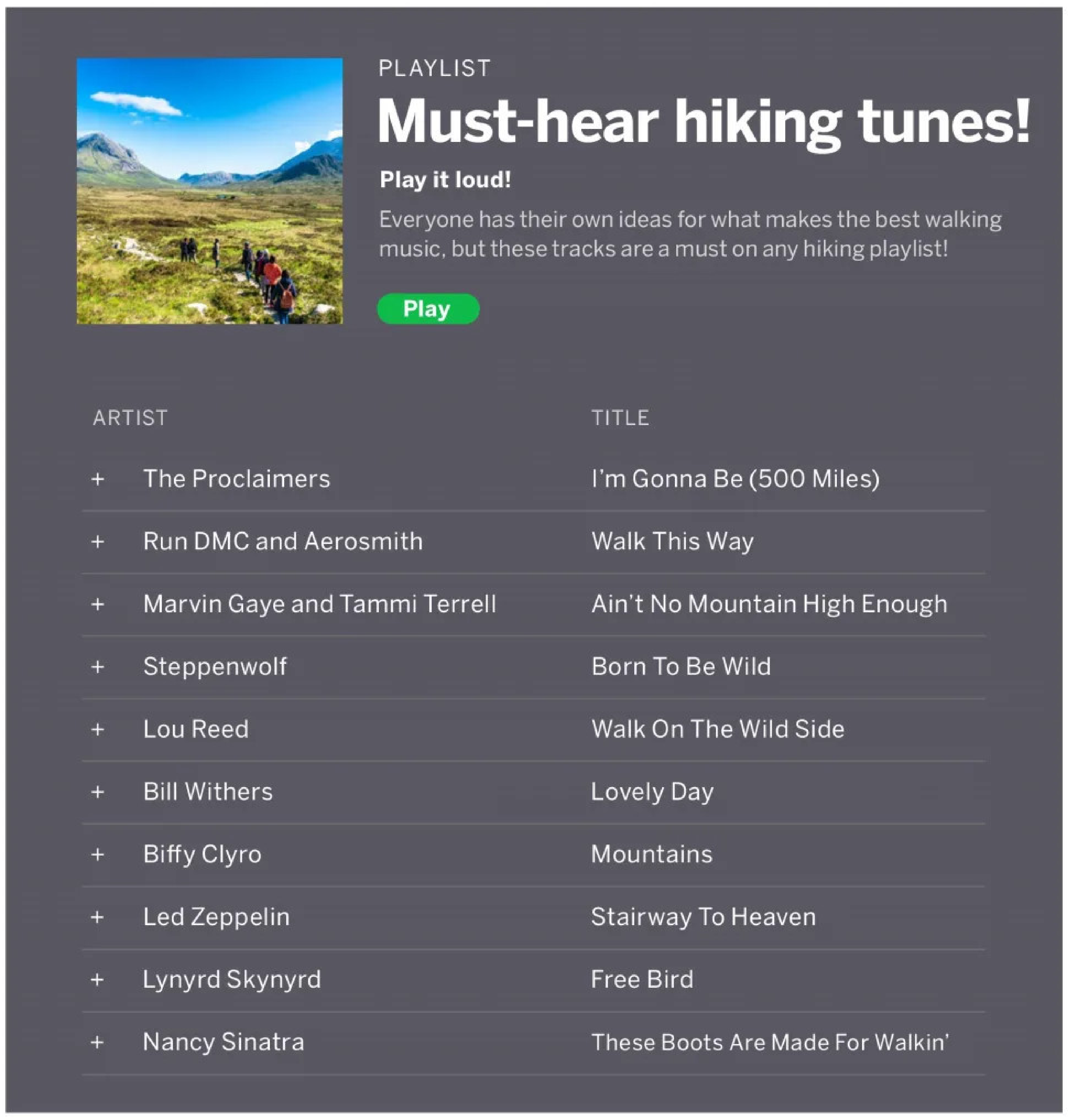
In case of an emergency, it's useful to have a way to start a small fire to keep warm. Matches are fine for this, but they need to be kept dry. You could opt for a lighter instead. You might also wish to carry some firestarter on long hikes to get a fire going in bad conditions, such as tinder or specific fire blocks.

FULLY CHARGED MOBILE/CELL PHONE

One of the reasons for going hiking is to get away from it all, but modern technology can come to your rescue, so always take a charged phone with you. Download the app 'what3words', which can help emergency services to locate you. It can be handy to have a GPS map app too, so you can use it to find your location on a map if you need to.

MAP AND COMPASS

Always carry a map of the area you are hiking in, and know how to use a compass. Technology can fail you, but having a paper map that you can read means you can always figure out where you are and where you need to go.



PLAYLIST

Must-hear hiking tunes!

Play it loud!

Everyone has their own ideas for what makes the best walking music, but these tracks are a must on any hiking playlist!

	ARTIST	TITLE
+	The Proclaimers	I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)
+	Run DMC and Aerosmith	Walk This Way
+	Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell	Ain't No Mountain High Enough
+	Steppenwolf	Born To Be Wild
+	Lou Reed	Walk On The Wild Side
+	Bill Withers	Lovely Day
+	Biffy Clyro	Mountains
+	Led Zeppelin	Stairway To Heaven
+	Lynyrd Skynyrd	Free Bird
+	Nancy Sinatra	These Boots Are Made For Walkin'

CAMERA

While it might not be an 'essential', having a camera with you means you can document the sights and sounds of your trip. You might want to make an album or scrapbook on your return as a memento of what you experienced. Try to take a separate camera to save using your phone battery, but it doesn't need to be an amazing, professional-level one.

WATERPROOF JACKET AND TROUSERS

Weather can change very quickly on the trails, so make sure that you're prepared. Pack lightweight waterproofs in your bag that you can quickly put on if you need to, or wear them from the start on wet or cold days. You can even get waterproof covers for your backpack.

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STAY SAFE WHEN HIKING

Nature is unpredictable, so be prepared for anything when out on the trails

"Shorter hikes give you a chance to test your kit and learn the ropes"

While there is a lot you can plan for when it comes to hiking (see pages 14-17), there is also a lot you can't predict. The more organised you are, the better you will be able to cope out on the trails if something unforeseen does happen. Safety is an important aspect of hiking and something that shouldn't be taken lightly.

BEFORE YOU SET OFF

There are things you can do before you even set foot out of the door to help ensure your safety. For a start, make sure someone has a copy of your hiking plans. Whether that's a full multi-day itinerary or a route for your daily hike, it's important to share these, along with expected rough timings and checkpoints. Ideally plan to go on your hike with a companion – if one of you falls and hurts themselves, the other can get help or administer first aid.

Double and even triple-check your pack before you leave, and make sure you have everything on our essential kit checklist (see pages 18-19). Customise your first-aid kit depending on the trip you are taking and what you might need. Also, check the weather in the area you will be hiking and make sure you have appropriate clothing and protection. This includes sun protection – sunburn and heatstroke can quickly become real dangers when you're out for a long time. Check that your kit, tent, bag and so on are in good condition, and make any repairs before you set off. Always wear good-quality, sturdy walking shoes to give you the best stability on rough terrain.

It's also worth checking whether the area you are hiking in is likely to have mobile/cell phone service. If you're in a remote location, this is definitely not a given. It might be worth investing in a personal locator beacon, which doesn't rely on the mobile signal and can alert emergency services in the event you need urgent aid using GPS satellites. Make sure you have a list of all the relevant phone numbers you might need, such as the emergency services, rescue services and family members who could help in minor incidents.

PRACTISE

If you're relatively new to hiking, do some smaller test hikes before you plan for a bigger adventure. These shorter hikes give you a chance to test your kit and learn the ropes of the sport. You can practise your map-reading and navigation skills in a relatively safe environment, not too far from home. It also gives you a chance to see how heavy your bag is, whether your shoes rub, if you have packed everything you need, or if you're carrying too much. This will make your main hike much safer than if you rushed into it unpractised.

It's always safer to hike with a friend or in a small group

Double-check your pack before you head out to make sure you have everything you need

FOLLOW THE TRAIL

While it can be tempting to diverge off the path, you should always stick to the trail you are on. Trails are usually marked, which can help you to stay on course and not get lost. You are much easier to find in an emergency if you're walking a known route, and far more likely to have an accident if you go off track, as there might be unsafe obstacles, or natural elements you haven't planned for, such as rivers or steep drops.

And it's not just the potential impact on your own safety to consider. You could be trampling through undisturbed foliage and vegetation, and disturbing local animals.

There are plenty of trails and hikes you can enjoy that are in remote wilderness, without having to forge your own path.

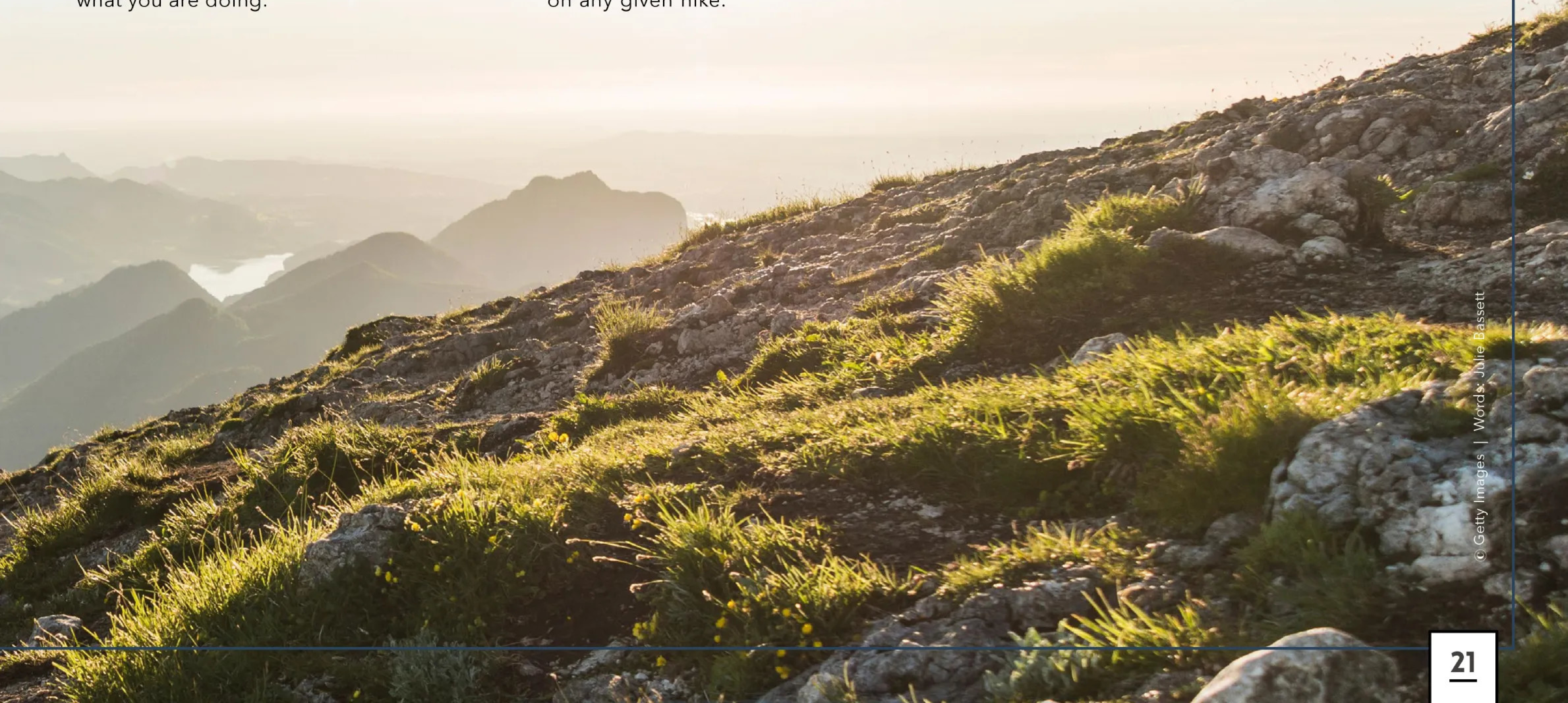
ON YOUR HIKE

When you are on a hike, always stay alert. Focus on the path in front of you and watch your footing. Take a pause at any new turn and double-check your map to ensure you're going the right way. Make sure you are drinking water frequently and eating enough for the duration of your hike. Be mindful of how you are feeling – if you're tired, slow down or take a short rest break. If you're too hot or too cold, adjust your clothing to suit the temperature and conditions.

Bear in mind that on a long hike, you will start to fatigue as time goes on. When you're tired, you are more likely to trip and fall, or stumble on uneven ground. You will be less focused and alert, so you might need to slow down a little and concentrate carefully on what you are doing.

It's also important to know when you need to stop. It's okay to deviate from your plan if you need to turn back sooner or take a longer rest between stages. It's much better to have a shorter, safer hike than it is to plough on when you're feeling sore, unfocused or over-tired. It only takes one bad judgement call on the trails to turn into an incident where you need help.

After each hike, consider logging it in a journal. With every hike, you will learn a lot, and by keeping a record of this, you will be able to ensure that you are more prepared for every future hike. Although saying that, beware of overconfidence – even the most experienced hiker can get into trouble. Don't take risks and don't assume you know everything you will face on any given hike.



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GETTING OUT THERE

If you're new to hiking, or haven't hiked in a while, here's our guide to getting out there

Hiking, at its core, is a very simple pursuit. Just plan where you want to go, pack a bag, throw on some comfy shoes and get walking. But, of course, there is a little more to it than that. There are lots of things you need to consider before you head off, whether it's for a short jaunt or a longer trip. You might also face hurdles or worries of your own that you need to overcome to get out on that hike.

A lot of these obstacles can be overcome with good planning, which we covered on pages 14-17. Good planning can help to calm fears and anxieties, and give you the confidence you need to tackle any trail you set your mind to.

BUILD CONFIDENCE

For many people, the things that are stopping them from getting out on a hike are based on certain ideas and perceptions surrounding hiking. It's not all epic adventures and long trails, heavy backpacks and wild camping (although that is all part of the fun, too!). Hiking can be whatever you make it, so don't set limits of what you can achieve or restrict your definition of hiking too narrowly.

To start with, you could simply incorporate more walking outdoors into your weekly routine. Find a bit of open space near you and aim to walk around it for half an hour after work one day. This introduces you to the benefits of being outside in nature, gives you some gentle exercise, and hopefully lights a fire of curiosity to try more adventurous hikes.

Then you can start to widen your scope. What is there in your local area that you could explore? Is there a woodland, forest or green park? Even in the most densely populated urban sprawls, it's possible to find open space, even if it means a short drive. Set yourself a challenge to find five places you want to hike in that you can reach within an hour's drive from home. As you begin to research what's around

A hike can be whatever you make it – don't make comparisons with what others are doing

Try your first camp close to home so you have a safety net to build confidence

“BUILD CONFIDENCE, ABILITY AND STAMINA FOR MORE CHALLENGING ADVENTURES”

you, you’ll realise how many trails there are available in the world.

When it comes to hiking, you can build yourself up in steps. You don’t have to throw yourself into a huge trek across a country over many days. That small, after-work walk might lead to regular longer trips at the weekend to hike for a couple of hours. That might then turn into your first overnighter. Camping not too far from home can give you confidence and prove that you can do it, with the safety net of knowing you can get back home if anything goes wrong.

BE REALISTIC

Don’t worry about anyone else’s definition of hiking. It’s a personal experience and you can decide what it means to you. Be realistic about what you can do in terms of the time you have, the budget you have, and where you can get to. Plan your hikes to fit in with what you can do right now. If you only plan for long-distance, challenging hikes that involve a trip away, you might always find excuses to put them off or find it hard to find the right time to do them around everything else in your life. So while it’s great to start thinking about the bucket-list hikes you really want to do, don’t forget to do hikes from your front door too.

You also need to be realistic about your current level of ability. If you’re fairly new to hiking, it’s not wise to pick a difficult trail with a high elevation and technical terrain, and to go solo! Start small and as you get used to hiking, you will build your confidence, ability and stamina so that you can plan more challenging adventures.

If you’re worried about getting out there for a hike on your own, rope in a friend, partner or family member to come with you. Safety in numbers applies in hiking, especially if you can go with a more experienced hiker to start off with. If you don’t know anyone, then maybe look to see if there is a local hiking group. These kinds of groups can help you to explore your area with people who can advise, explain and look out for you on your first few hikes. They are also great for meeting people with similar interests, and you can benefit from their wealth of knowledge.

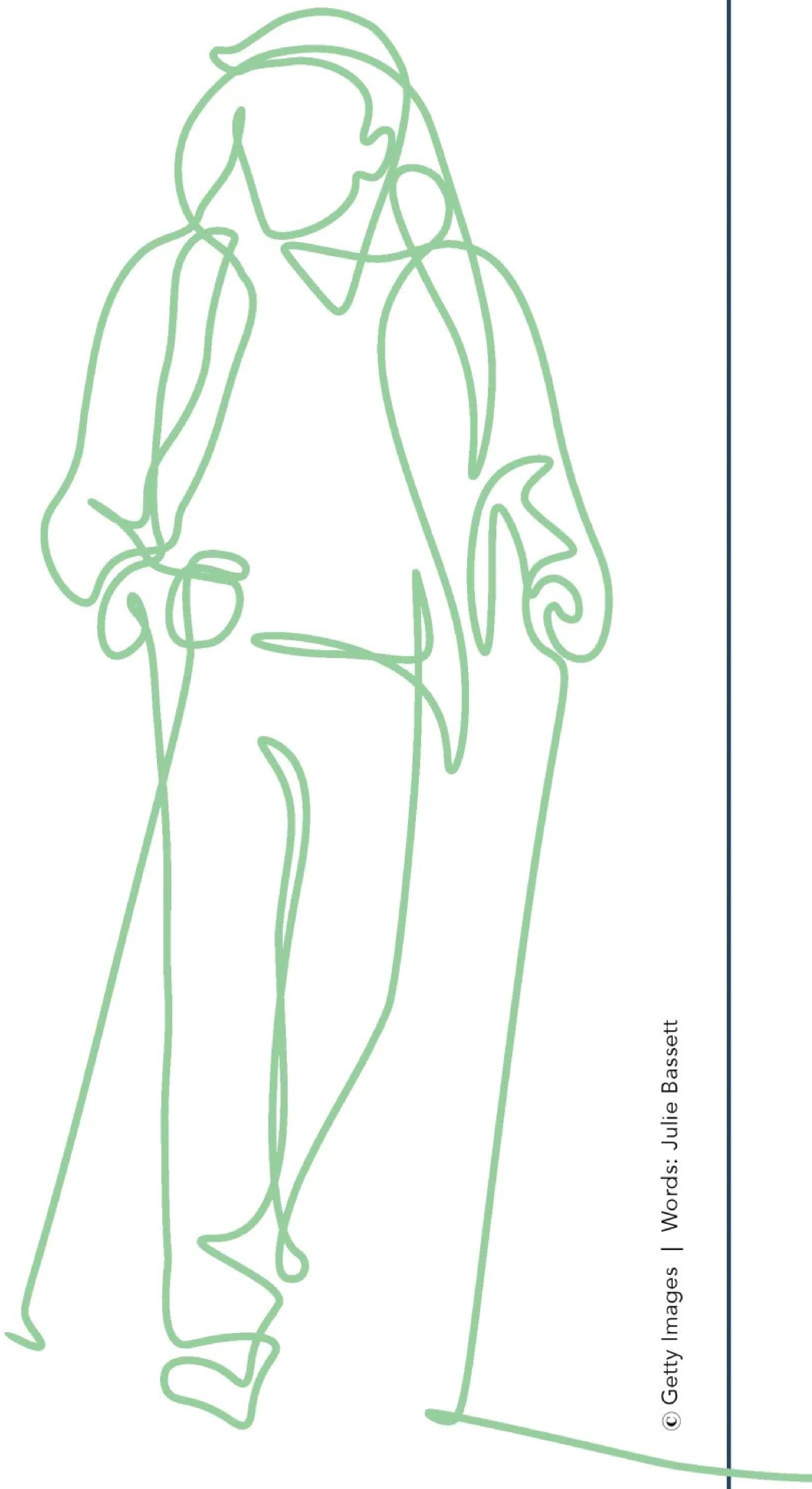
Make yourself a plan for a hike right now, something you can achieve in the short term, and do it. You’ll learn a lot from every hike, and you’ll never regret getting out there.

Joining a hiking group means you can learn from more experienced hikers

URBAN HIKING

There are plenty of adventures to be had in the city

Okay, so ‘urban hiking’ might seem like an oxymoron, but it is a growing trend in the hiking world. No, it’s not going to give you the awe-inspiring views you might get from the top of a mountain, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be an adventure. It’s possible to find beauty in any city or town, if you have the right mindset. An urban hike is more than just a sightseeing walk; it’s about actively seeking out adventure. There are a few trails that go through major cities, such as the Thames Path in the UK, a National Trail that goes through central London; or the historic Freedom Trail through downtown Boston, often passing sights of interest. However, more often than not you’ll be finding your own path. All you need are comfy shoes, a backpack with essentials, and a map of the city, plus a few spare hours, and you can have an adventure of your own wherever you happen to be.



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LOOK OUT FOR THESE SYMBOLS OVER THE FOLLOWING PAGES

- DISTANCE
- DURATION
- DIFFICULTY
- ROUTE TYPE
- ELEVATION GAIN
- PHOTO OPPORTUNITY
- PLACE TO STAY
- PLACE OF INTEREST
- PLACE TO EAT

THE AMERICAS

26
BRIGHT ANGEL TRAIL, USA

28
APPALACHIAN TRAIL, USA

30
W TREK, CHILE

32
WEST COAST TRAIL, CANADA

34
INCA TRAIL, PERU

38
PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, USA/CANADA

40
LOST CITY, COLOMBIA

42
ANGELS LANDING TRAIL, USA

44
LAGUNA DE LOS TRES, ARGENTINA

46
BEST OF THE REST

© Getty Images

USA

BRIGHT ANGEL TRAIL

One of those hikes you'll still be thinking about for many years to come

30.6km/19mi

2 days

Moderate to Difficult

Out & Back

1,500m/4,920ft

The Bright Angel Trail is one of the most scenic walks in the world

No matter how many videos or photographs you see of the Grand Canyon, it's undoubtedly one of those places that you can only fully appreciate by being there and seeing it for yourself. The majesty, the immensity, the history, the colours – it really is an experience of a lifetime.

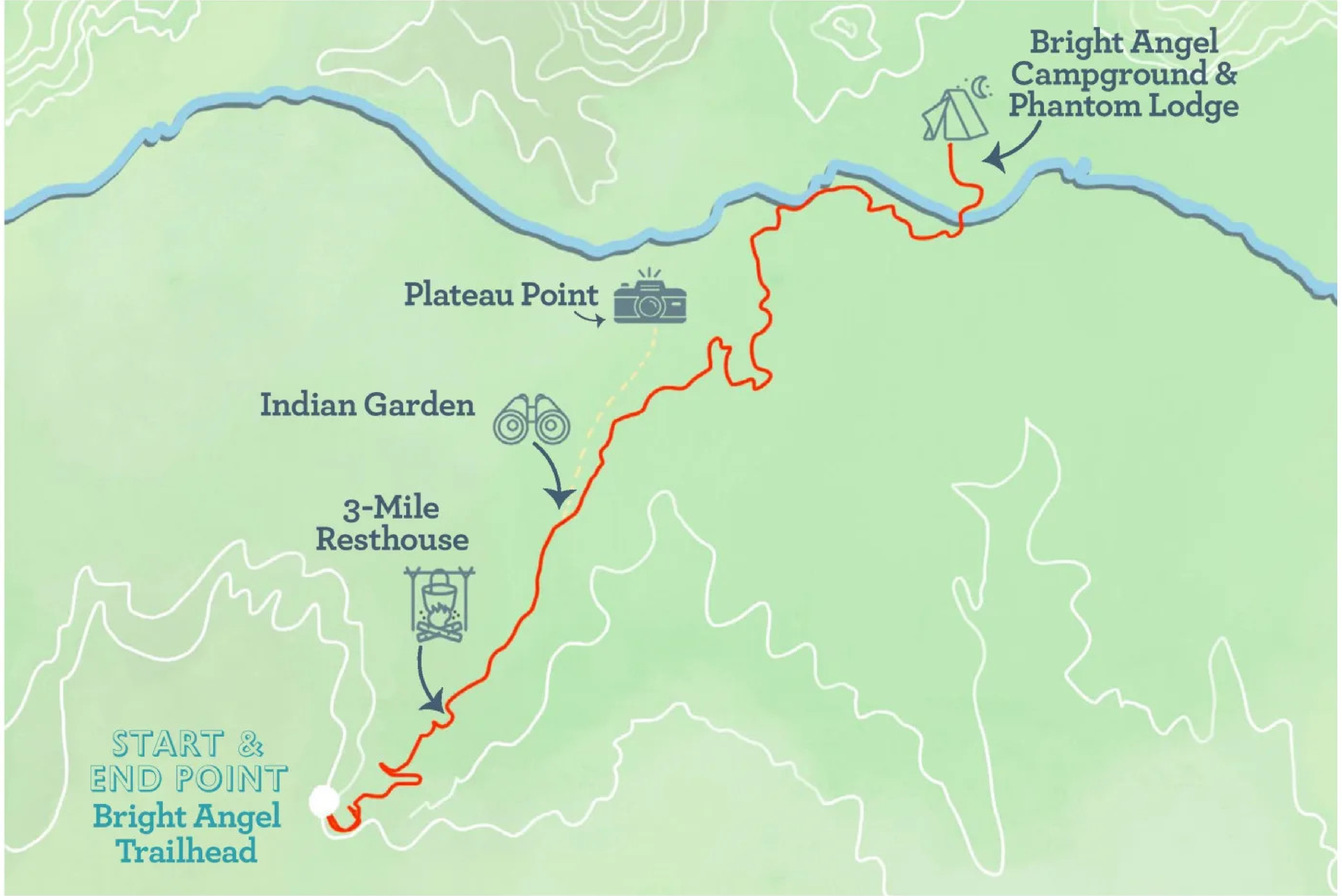
The Bright Angel Trail on the South Rim is an ancient route that has been used for many centuries by Native American groups for whom the Grand Canyon is home. Early western pioneers at the canyon first built a trail there in 1891 to reach mining spots at Indian Garden. To aid tourist trade, the pioneers quickly registered the trail as a toll road, and extended the trail to the Colorado River, but it was turned over to the National Park Service in 1928.

These days, the Bright Angel Trail is a very popular hiking route. It leads from the trailhead at the mule corral, very near the Grand Canyon Village, just west of Bright Angel Lodge, deep down into the canyon to the river. And back up!

The dirt trail is well maintained and wide enough to let two-legged and four-legged beasts pass with care. (Incidentally, mules and mule trains have right of way whether you're going up or down, and the code of conduct is important to follow: step off the trail, stand still and wait silently until the mule has passed you by 15 metres (50 feet).) The trail is one of the most famous in the world so don't expect to be alone out there – probably a relief to most hikers! Peak times are busy and the way can be icy and snowy for a few miles in places at the top during wintertime. Whatever the time of year, you'll need to carry water with you – there are water stops at the trailhead and then at the Indian Garden all year round. Additional water stops are available at certain times of the year, but these supplies are not guaranteed so take your own to be safe.

Unsurprisingly, the views are incredible at all times on this hike – you'll quickly develop multitasking skills looking after your footing, checking out the view and grabbing your camera all at the same time. The abundance of 'wow factor' on the way down means you easily lose track of how far you've hiked, and it's easy to overlook the deceptive steepness of the trail while on the way down. In fact, it's not unusual for the return leg to take double the time, so plan accordingly for that. While it may be achievable for experienced hikers, park rangers strenuously advise against doing the full trail in a single day, particularly from May to September. Day trippers should turn around at the Indian Garden; if you're planning on doing the whole thing, there's an overnight lodge at Phantom Ranch and a campground at Bright Angel Creek – both are a short walk from the north side of the Colorado River. Cottonwood trees provide welcome shade at Bright Angel Campground, and you can have a reinvigorating dip in the creek in the day and stargaze at night.

Not only is the Grand Canyon a geological marvel, it's also home to hundreds of species of bird, mammal, reptile and amphibian. You may spot deer, ringtail cats, foxes, elk and rock squirrels on your hike, but no matter how cute any of them look, leave well alone. Squirrel bites are the leading animal-related injury to park visitors at the Grand Canyon!



A series of hairpin bends makes the incline less noticeable on the way down, but you'll feel it on the trip back!

Let's look at the route itself. The views you get on the Bright Angel Trail are framed by massive cliffs. Although it's hot and exposed in summer, it is in fact one of the shadiest trails in the Grand Canyon, and therefore has more natural water sources, meaning it's more decorated by plant and animal life. The first 6.5 kilometres (four miles) of the route will see the steepest descent, via a seemingly interminable series of hairpin bends. If you've started early, the view of the sunrise from the 3-Mile Resthouse is really beautiful and worth getting out of bed for.

As you get deeper down into the canyon, it flattens out across Tonto Platform. If you're doing an overnighter and have more time to play with, the extra excursion to Plateau Point is worthwhile. The detour will take you to a lookout with stunning panoramic views of the towering canyon cliffs and the Colorado River below.

The main trail continues through Garden Creek, this section of the hike can be brutally hot, best attempted closer to dawn or dusk. The last part of the outward leg involves crossing sand dunes (which can be blisteringly hot) for more than a mile until you reach the shady Silver Bridge to cross the Colorado River. From here, it's not far to the Bright Angel Campground and Phantom Ranch for a well-deserved rest before starting the return journey.

> "UNSURPRISINGLY, THE VIEWS ARE INCREDIBLE AT ALL TIMES ON THIS HIKE"

START POINT

BRIGHT ANGEL TRAILHEAD

END POINT

BRIGHT ANGEL TRAILHEAD

GETTING THERE

It's a long drive to the Grand Canyon. The closest major airport is Las Vegas, and from there it's a 4.5-hour drive to the South Rim. Alternatively, you can take a bus tour that starts in Vegas or San Francisco. There are free shuttle buses around the national park itself.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Late spring or early autumn. During summer, the region is blisteringly hot, particularly from May to September. In winter and early spring, upper parts of the trail can get icy. It's also a very popular route – at peak times, the trail can resemble a snaking traffic jam of hikers.

WHAT TO WEAR

Depending on the weather, you'll need to protect yourself from the elements, most likely the sun. The majority of the trail is exposed, so wear plenty of sunscreen and a hat. Light clothing and sturdy shoes are required.

WHAT TO TAKE

Take enough food and drink to keep you going. There are rest stops and water taps en route, but you'll need your own supplies. Trekking poles aren't essential but are recommended.

PIT STOPS

There are a few rest and water stops. Only the Indian Garden and Bright Angel Campground water supplies are available year-round; others are seasonal, so check before you set off.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

The trailhead is very close to Grand Canyon Village where there are numerous lodges and campgrounds. On the hike itself, stay overnight at Bright Angel Campground (a permit is required for any camping below the canyon rim) or at Phantom Ranch (booking required).

USEFUL WEBSITES

nps.gov
grandcanyon.org
visitgrandcanyon.com

© Getty Images; Free Vector Maps | Words: Rachel Ifans

New England's woodland changes from verdant green to an explosion of orange as summer turns to autumn

USA

APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Take a walk in the woods on one of America's most vibrant footpaths

3,529km/2,193mi | **6 months** | **Difficult** | **Point to Point** | **141,579m/464,500ft**

Up for a long-distance challenge? Why not join the hardy (or just plain crazy) band of thru-hikers who walk the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in one go. Every year, 3,500 people lace up their boots and aim to cross off all 14 states along the route; most begin in Georgia in March or April and hope to reach Maine before Baxter State Park shuts down for the winter in mid-October. Around a quarter of the footsore walkers make it to their destination.

The southern end of the trail snakes through Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee, and boasts several impressive peaks in Blood Mountain, Standing Indian Mountain and Wayah Bald. Unsurprisingly, walkers here should be prepared for undulating paths and some steep hills, with thick forests coating the lower levels. One of the most popular sections can be found in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which contains the highest point on the entire route, Clingmans Dome. To avoid the crowds, go a little further along the path to the Mau-Har Loop in Virginia. The mountainous views are just as great, waterfalls and swimming holes line the path, and there will be a fraction of the number of hikers along the path that you'll find elsewhere.

Things level out further into Virginia. The state contains a quarter of the trail's length inside its borders, and the well-maintained paths of Shenandoah National Park are perhaps the best place for first-time hikers to begin. Stunning views of the Blue Ridge Mountains are ever-present along the Shenandoah Valley as the trail runs parallel to Skyline Drive. Wildlife watchers should be alert for black bears – this is one of the best sections to spot them – and there are plenty of facilities and shops in the settlements off the long-distance path. Navigation is easy; the Appalachian Trail has iconic white paint flashes along its length, and any side trails that lead to towns and other places of interest are marked in blue.

Along some of the blue trails are shelters and campsites maintained by an army of 4,000 volunteers. Stay in one of these and you'll find grizzled veterans of the trail with whom to swap stories and advice. Some will be on long-distance treks, others tackle a section at a time on multi-day trips or prefer to return to the same spot year after year. For a more solitary experience, simply pitch a tent at the side of the trail. Even the national parks have relaxed rules about pitching a tent wherever suits, as long as you leave no trace when you depart.

Aim to hit New England in autumn when the forest trails explode into a riot of colour. Hikers are joined by hordes of day-tripping leaf-peepers who flock to the trail to see the majestic forests coated in yellow, orange and red as the trees prepare to shed their summer coats. As the Appalachian Trail leaves behind the relatively flat Massachusetts, it reaches some of its toughest lung-busting and thigh-burning terrain. White Mountain National Forest has a network of hiking trails that provide access to Mount Moosilauke, Mount Washington and the Kinsman Range. The contrast to the sun-kissed peaks at the other end of the trail is striking; here, hardy hikers must slog through energy-sapping tundra with icy, frozen sections giving way to sticky bogs.

> "YOU CAN PITCH A TENT WHEREVER SUITS BY THE TRAIL, AS LONG AS YOU LEAVE NO TRACE"

As the end point slowly nears, the Appalachian Trail heads into Maine's 100-Mile Wilderness. No paved roads cross the trail during this long section, the first third of which includes Gulf Hagas, a slate gorge filled with pretty waterfalls and panoramic views of the Barren-Chairback Range. Keep an eye out for bronzed, lean walkers with a dogged but footsore stride. They may be one of the thru-hikers closing in on their destination with a steely determination to add their name to the exclusive club who have walked the entire 3,529 kilometres (2,193 miles) in one go.

Of course, most of the three million people who use the Appalachian Trail every year aren't quite so committed. Thankfully, the length and diversity of its route does mean that this is one hike you can return to again and again while never tackling the same section twice.

START POINT
SPRINGER MOUNTAIN, GEORGIA
END POINT
MOUNT KATAHDIN, MAINE

GETTING THERE

There is ample car parking along the entire route wherever you choose to begin or end.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

March to October to avoid winter weather on the highest peaks.

WHAT TO WEAR

An orange hat or vest is vital to prevent accidents during hunting season.

WHAT TO TAKE

A mobile/cell phone for emergencies. There is good reception along almost the entire route.

PIT STOPS

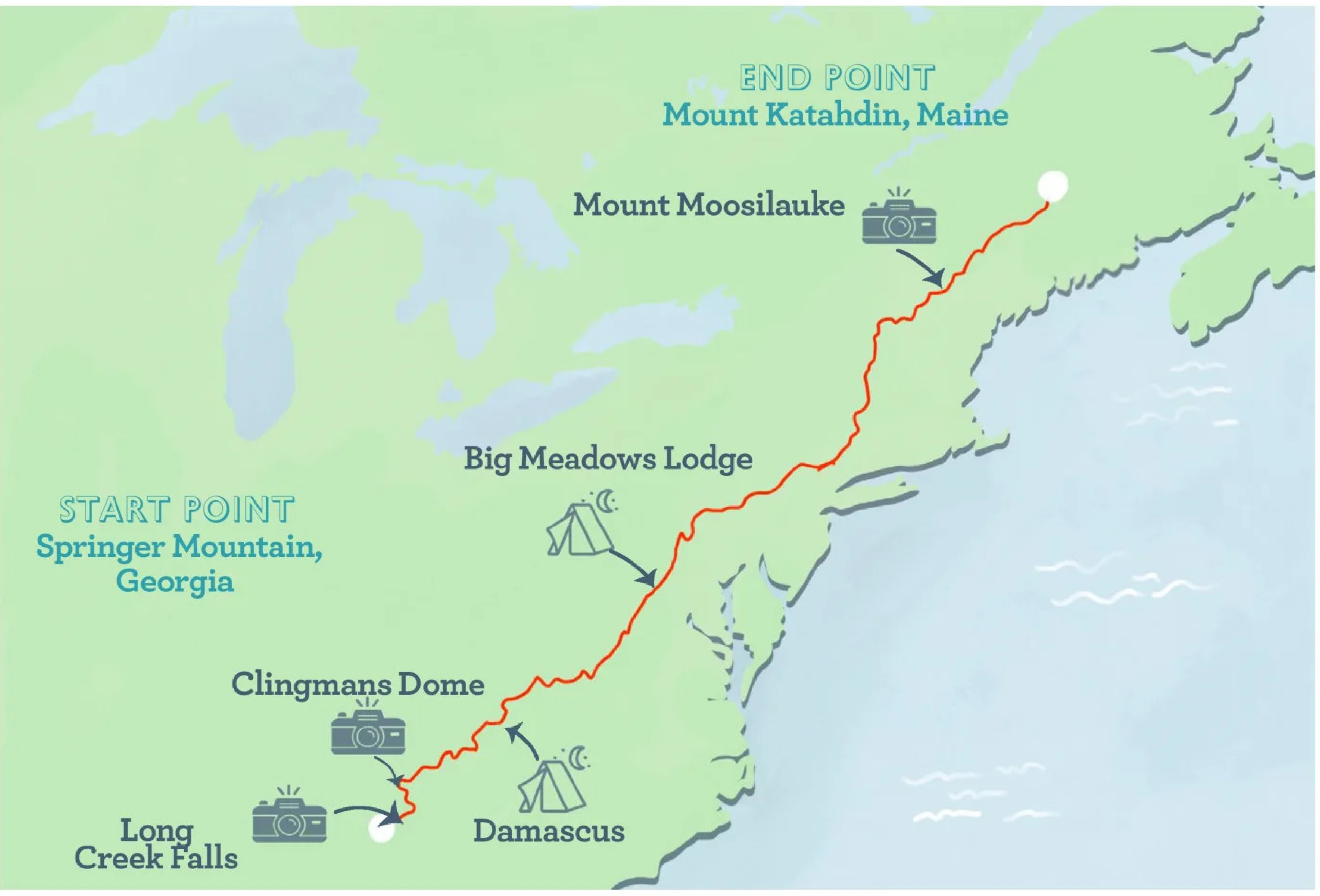
Towns just off the trail are accustomed to hikers passing through to purchase supplies.

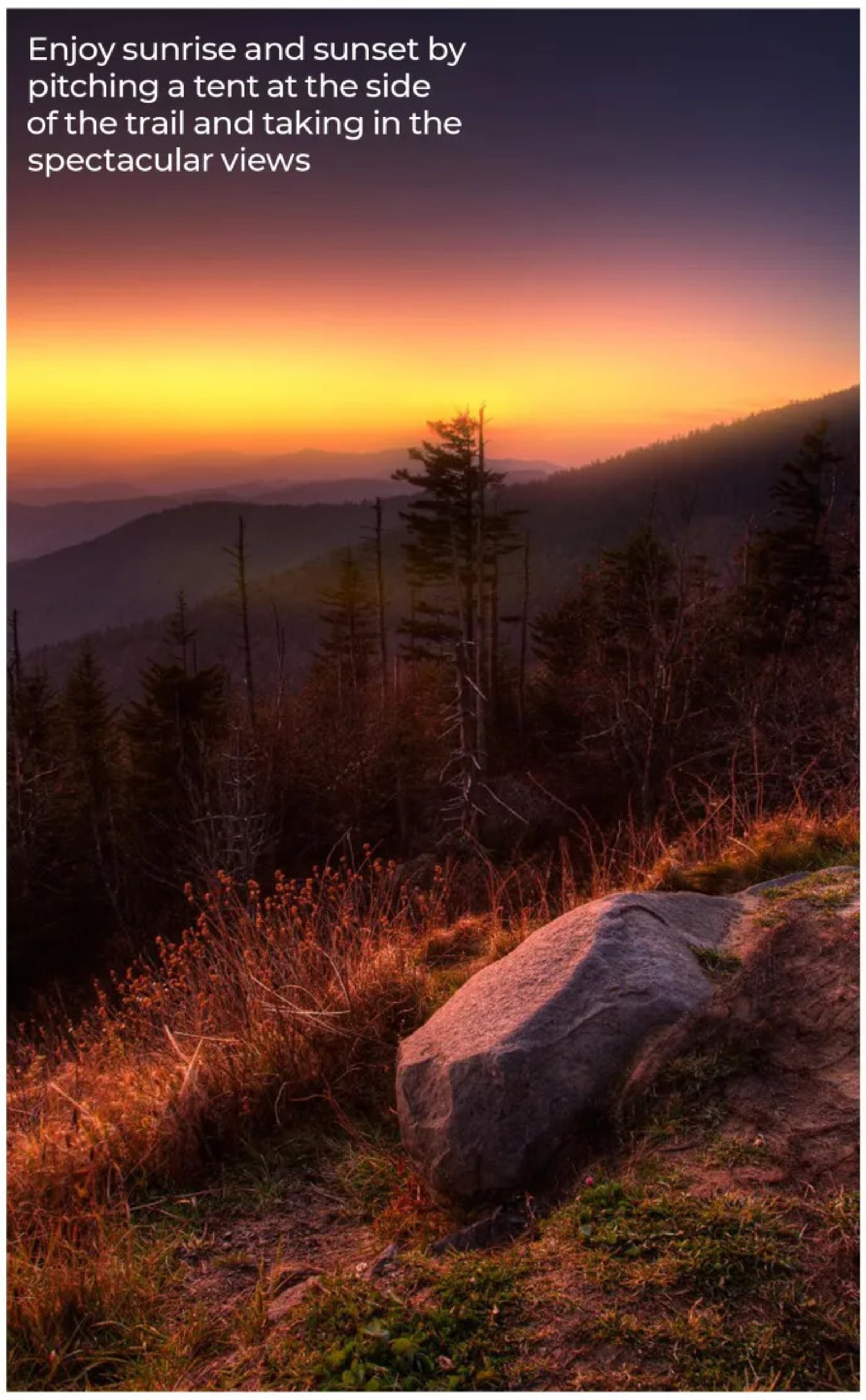
ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

The trail has more than 250 shelters and campsites, usually spaced around a day's hike apart.

USEFUL WEBSITES

appalachiantrail.org
nps.gov/appa
atlantatrails.com/georgia-appalachian-trail




Enjoy sunrise and sunset by pitching a tent at the side of the trail and taking in the spectacular views

© Wiki/ Julian Colton; Getty Images | Words: Scott Reeves

CHILE

W TREK

The slice of Patagonian paradise where soaring mountains meet mirror lakes

74km/46mi | 3 to 5 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 2,700m/8,860ft

START POINT
REFUGIO LAS TORRES
END POINT
PAINE GRANDE

GETTING THERE

From Puerto Natales, buses run to Torres del Paine in the morning and afternoon.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

December to February are best for long days and good weather.

WHAT TO WEAR

Patagonian weather is unpredictable, so layers are highly recommended, as are a good-quality wind-proof coat and a rain jacket.

WHAT TO TAKE

Sunscreen, a head torch and a hydration bladder, as well as camping equipment for those hoping to sleep under the stars.

PIT STOPS

Guests can enjoy dinner at most refugios (similar to hostels) and hotels, and many campsites have a small kitchen. Restrooms can be found at refugios and campsites, though some are basic.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

A varied mix of accommodation is available throughout the trail, including campsites, refugios, eco lodges and luxury hotels.

USEFUL WEBSITES

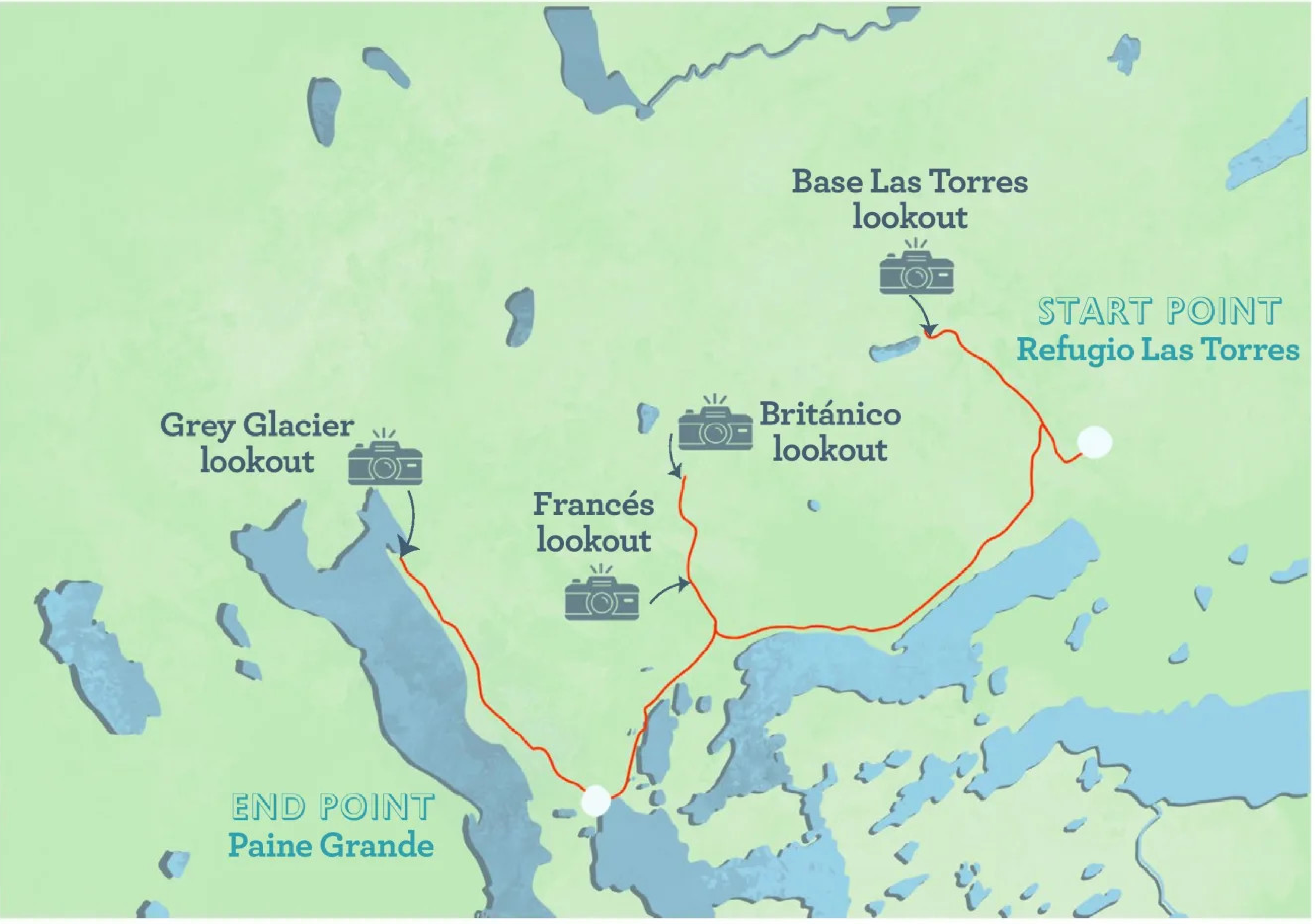
parquetorresdelpaine.cl
verticepatagonia.cl
lagogrey.com

The crystal-clear waters of Torres del Paine's lakes reflect the stunning surroundings

The W Trek is a geological treasure hunt that unearths the best that Chile's Torres del Paine National Park has to offer: skyrocketing mountains, hauntingly beautiful Magellanic subpolar forests, teal lakes and gigantic glaciers. From a vast windswept plain, it slithers 74 kilometres (46 miles), taking in Torres del Paine's three crown jewels: Las Torres, Francés Valley and Grey Glacier.

This popular trail is typically traversed from east to west. It begins at Refugio Las Torres and takes you through three enormous valleys, creating the 'W' shape that gives the trek its name. Leaving Refugio Las Torres, the route stretches out beside the gurgling Ascencio River. After hugging the gentle curve of the river, it dives deep through ancient beech forest, alive with woodpeckers and sparrows, into Ascencio Valley. The trail lazily threads itself between chains of glacial-pure waterfalls and around ghostly-white trunks of fallen trees, which punctuate the landscape, like the fallen columns of ancient ruins.

Pushing north, the trail scrambles across a steep, scree and boulder-filled moraine until the distinctive rocky fingers of Las Torres ('The Towers') suddenly reveal themselves. Taking in the view from the Base Las Torres lookout, the three granite monoliths erupt from the Patagonian steppe and shoot into the cold Chilean sky. Casting twisted shadows, they loom large over an emerald-green, glacial lake. The iconic view is best enjoyed at sunrise, when waves of blood-red and orange light flood down each cloud-cloaked pinnacle, as the sun kisses them



Guanacos can be spotted grazing on the park's grassy tundra

each morning. After soaking in the views, the trail U-turns, retracing its steps back through the valley and along the river.

After descending, it veers west, following the shoreline of the milky Lake Nordenskjöld. It nudges across pampa and grassy tundra, dotted with Chilean firebush, which erupt into clouds of red each spring. Overhead, Andean condors ride the thermals, searching for carrion. With a wingspan of more than three metres (ten feet), they are among the largest birds in the world. While land-roaming critters are elusive during the day, come nightfall pumas silently slink down the mountainside, and the ever-shy Huemul deer quietly graze, ears pricked.

As the trail pushes on, the metamorphic horns of Los Cuernos ('The Horns') come into focus, with their contrasting layers of stratified black slate and grey granite. The crown of jagged peaks, each towering more than 2,000 metres (6,560 feet) high, are a poignant ode to the power of Mother Nature, having been forged, tortured and shaped by the elements over millennia.

The trail ekes north towards the Francés Valley, the very heart of the Paine Massif. At the Francés River, the trail offers up the first glimpse of the hanging Francés Glacier. After braving the hanging bridge, the path climbs through evergreen beech forest, towards the Francés lookout. The natural viewpoint reveals the magnificent sight of the western side of Los Cuernos, as well as the glacier itself, which cracks and creaks as ice calves from its face.

Continuing to another viewing spot, Británico Lookout, the route climbs quickly and steeply until, finally, delivering hikers to the heart of the immense Francés Valley.

The park takes its name from the distinctive granite peaks of Las Torres

Encircled by an amphitheatre of immense rocky teeth, the echoes of distant avalanches ricochet and thunder. Among the most prominent peaks are Hoja, Espada, Catedral and the spectacular Fortaleza.

The trail turns on its head, before slithering back down the glacial valley. From there, it squeezes between the southern face of Cerro Paine Grande – the tallest peak in the park, which reaches an altitude of approximately 2,800 metres (9,186 feet) above sea level – and the mirror-like Lake Pehoé, which silently reflects the moment snow-covered peaks kiss the cloudless sky. From here, the trail sweeps along the eastern bank of the inky Lake Grey, flecked with house-sized chunks of blue-veined ice, before squeezing north to the lookout of Grey Glacier lookout, a vertiginous rocky ledge halfway up the valley.

The trail stretches further up the valley, towards the cobalt blue snout of Grey Glacier. The icy, crevice-scarred expanse stands almost 30 metres (98 feet) tall and covers around 270 square kilometres (104 square miles). Grey Glacier forms part of the huge Southern Patagonian Ice Field, but its immense size does not make it immune to the effects of climate change – it's thinning twice as fast as a decade ago, and huge slabs of ice calve from its face underneath the afternoon sun. After basking in the primal force of creation, the trail makes its final descent, down to Paine Grande.

© Getty Images; Free Vector Maps | Words: Joanne Al-Samarae

There are a few settlements and lighthouses that dot the coastline of this hike, making for some pleasant vistas

CANADA

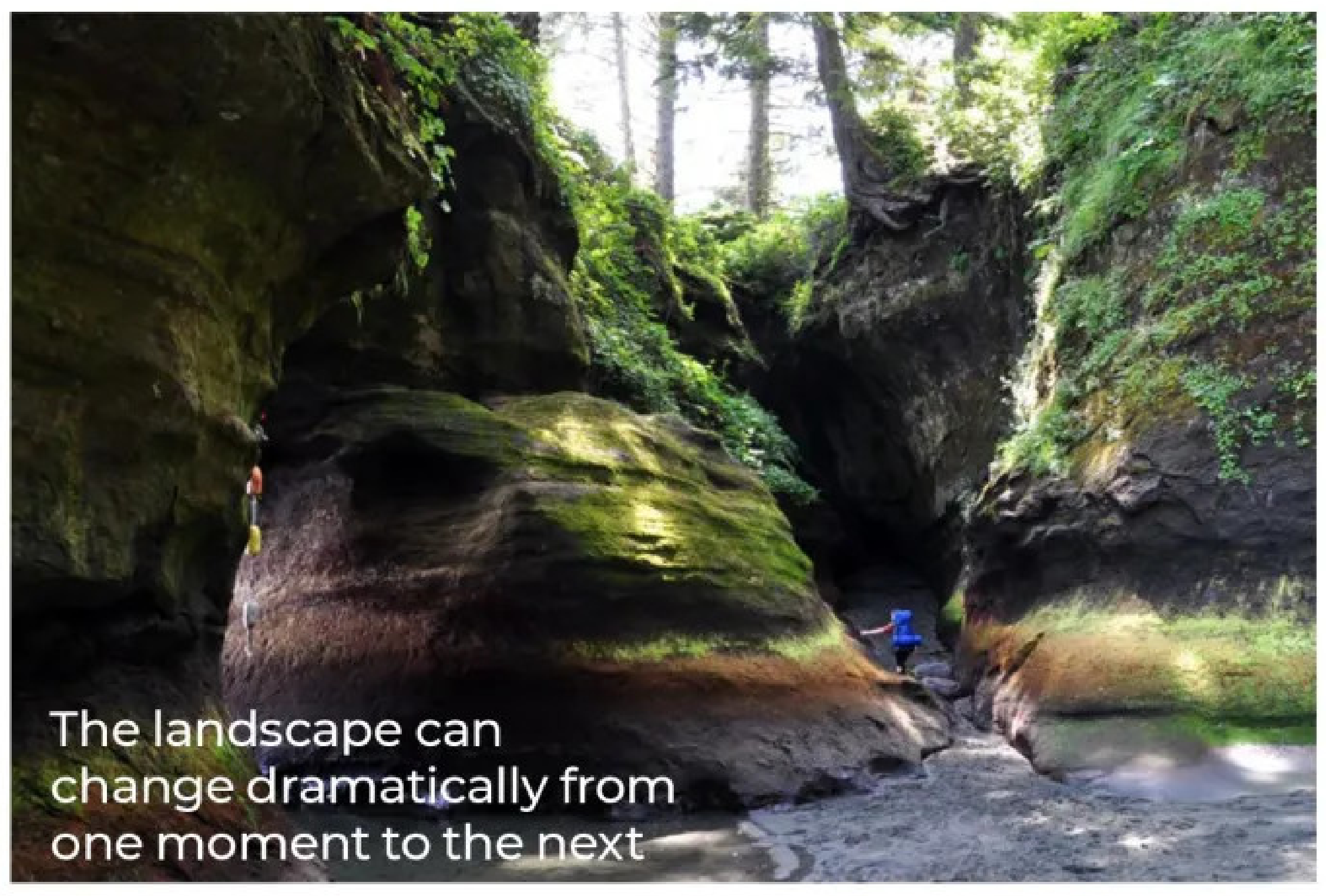
WEST COAST TRAIL

Perhaps the best example of the adage 'good things are worth fighting for'

75km/46mi 6-8 days Difficult Point to Point 1,508m/4,948ft

There aren't many countries as bountiful with nature as Canada. In between its vast yet sporadically placed cities are stretches of endless awe; from the peaks of the Rockies to the cascading falls of Niagara, it is an extensive country filled with natural splendour. Nowhere is that more prominent than in British Columbia, the western edge of the country that can tout rugged mountains, pristine lakes and even beachside vistas. But for hikers, the area is probably best known for the West Coast Trail, a gruelling tour through the largest island on the Pacific Coast: Vancouver Island. It's infamous for the challenge that it sets those ready to test themselves in this coastal rainforest, sending travellers across precarious edges, up and down numerous ladders into and out of gorges, wading through rivers and battling the very elements themselves. It's an adventure, and not always an enjoyable one, but it's the best-known hike in the country for a reason; few have left the trail without a sense of satisfaction, reward and – for some people – a certain spirituality that no other hikes can provide.

It's a historically relevant trail, too, having been used by the First Nations people for trade. From the 1800s, the coastline was dominated by trading ships that struggled to overcome the fog and poor weather of the area – ultimately leading to the unfortunate nickname Graveyard of the Pacific. This, alongside a number of coves, falls and beachside walks, adds to the tantalising nature of the route – providing you have the staying power to make it all the way.



The landscape can change dramatically from one moment to the next

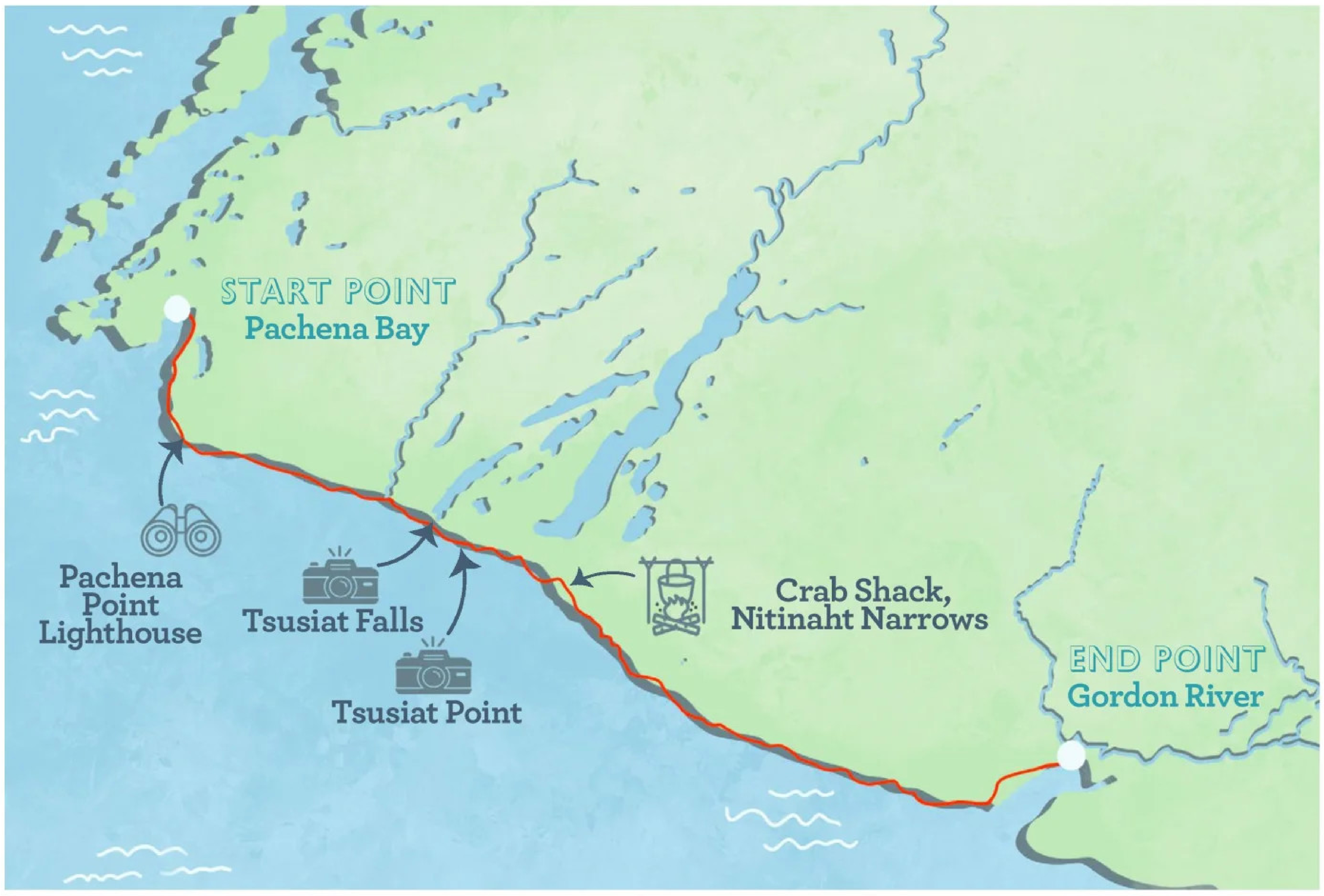
Though the West Coast Trail can be hiked in any direction, it's typically done so from north to south, beginning at the trailhead in Pachena Bay and ending at Gordon River.

And since it's pretty much all backcountry, it's important to be prepared. This means the right worn-in footwear, the ability to prepare some food when camping and, of course, a first-aid kit to deal with the inevitable pests and problems that might arise on any lengthy hike. A trail permit is also required, though it's not necessary to have a guide or porter while on the hike. In fact, since the feeling of remoteness is one of the aspects of the West Coast Trail that most hikers find so rewarding, hiring a guide is perhaps only going to deter from the fulfilment that it offers. There's going to be plenty of wildlife to see as well, offering amazing glimpses of less commonly sighted animals that hikers may not typically see. Orca whales and dolphins especially are a treat, but since much of the route rambles along the ebb and flow of the tide, there's a bounty of coastal creatures to keep an eye out for – and you can even get an official checklist to print out and mark as you march along the shore.

But this isn't a consistent trail. The weather of the region can be unpredictable to say the least, meaning there can be situations where flooded rivers and broken bridges or ladders will either need to be waited out or navigated in a different way. If you're unlucky enough to have to endure the temperamental weather of Vancouver Island, then you need to be flexible. That could mean the option to wait out the rain for most of the day (or days) in a tent, or taking one of the alternative routes if possible. But it's still a challenge even outside of unexpected weather conditions: roughly 100 ladders to climb up or down, rivers to wade through and long stretches of beach-hiking will add to the struggle. A stroll along the gorgeous coastline might not sound so arduous, but given the heavy backpack and tent that you'll be carrying with you, the soft sand will make each step a tiring slog.

So, this is certainly not a hike for the foolhardy or the inexperienced, but if you've already got some miles under your belt then there's every reason to want to put this on your list of must-do hikes. Even so, don't be afraid to admit defeat – many hikers only make it halfway and leave at Nitinat Narrows on a ferry. In any case, the West Coast Trail is something to conquer, and if you manage it then the feeling of satisfaction it will provide is unparalleled.

Since you'll be hiking as the sun goes down, you're guaranteed some gorgeous sights while setting up camp



START POINT

PACHENA BAY

END POINT

GORDON RIVER

GETTING THERE

Head to Bamfield first. From Bamfield, it's just over 5.5km (3.4mi) to Pachena Bay, though there is a taxi service.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

The trail is only open between May and September due to poor weather outside of those months, though July and August will minimise risk of bad conditions.

WHAT TO WEAR

A decent, lightweight rain coat will be invaluable here, since even if it doesn't rain it will still help to protect you from the coastal wind.

WHAT TO TAKE

A tide table will help with the beach walks, but it's also important to have some kind of emergency signalling equipment, GPS or phone. It could be lifesaving should you need it.

PIT STOPS

Though this is mostly backcountry, a number of villages dot the coast for opportunities to buy a cooked meal. Chez Monique's has long been a favourite rest stop.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

You can camp anywhere on Canada's West Coast Trail, however, there are 13 official campsites and even luxurious cabins at Ditidaht and Nitinat Narrows.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/bc/pacificrim/activ/SCO-WCT
www.bcferries.com
westcoasttrail.com/tents-and-cabins/#cabins

© Wiki;Pixabay ; Free Vector Maps | Words: Adam Barnes

There aren't many hikes in the world that can offer such a stunning landmark as a reward

PERU

INCA TRAIL

The iconic hiking trail and a true bucket-list experience

40km/25mi | 4 days | Difficult | Point to Point | 3,100m/10,170ft

Everyone is familiar with the old adage 'It's about the journey, not the destination', but it's one that hikers must hold close to their heart. Though routes might have a peak, landmark or vista as their ultimate goal, most passionate hikers will agree that often it's less about those awe-inspiring views but rather the quiet satisfaction that comes from tip-toeing around steep crevices, successfully wading through a rushing river or the simple constant of putting one foot in front of the other. It's hard to argue that this is the case with the Inca Trail, one of the most famous hiking routes in the world and likely the key reason more than four million tourists visit Peru each year. That destination? Machu Picchu of course, the ancient Incan ruins that sit atop the Andes.

But this fame comes with a price, and so before you take your first steps on the ancient path of the Incas, it's important to remember that you will need to book quite some time in advance. Machu Picchu itself has a limitation imposed on the number of daily visitors to avoid excessive damage caused by tourism, and there are strict four-hour time slots to adhere to. Turning up at

Hiking poles will definitely be beneficial, especially on the descent the gates of this once-royal estate without a ticket could ultimately mean all the effort of the hike would only end in disappointment. Tickets sell out long in advance, so if the Inca Trail is something you're aiming for (and honestly, it's one of those must-see destinations that almost anyone should do once in their life), then you should be careful to plan ahead of time. This isn't a trail for the spontaneous.

With that addressed, it's definitely a trip that is well worth the consideration. Many a well-trodden hiker counts the Inca Trail as one of their favourites, a life-changing expedition for most that sticks in their memories. Part of this is, of course, the historical landmark that acts as the climax of the trip, but much of it is also the challenge of the trek. It might not be as punishing as the world's most intense hikes, but at more than 4,200 metres (13,780 feet) high and with a hiked elevation of more than three kilometres (just under two miles), this is not for the faint of heart, and some basic training or experience will be hugely beneficial. With that said, it's a requirement for hikers to be accompanied by a guide or porter for the trail, and visitors must also be accompanied by a tour guide to enter Machu Picchu itself. Luckily, the popularity of the hike means there's a wide selection of guides available for the journey, though be sure to check reviews of the company before signing up, just to be certain that you're in good hands. This also means expecting the unexpected a little: it can be cost effective to join one of the larger groups, and naturally you'll meet new people as a

> "AT MORE THAN 4,200 METRES HIGH, THIS IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART"

The Inca Trail feels like another world

START POINT
PISKACUCHO
END POINT
MACHU PICCHU

GETTING THERE
First it's either a plane or a bus from Lima to Cusco, and then the Machu Picchu train to the starting point.

WHEN TO TRAVEL
September marks the end of the dry season, so has lowest risk of rain. October is the Goldilocks' point between busyness and decent weather, with November having the fewest tourists.

WHAT TO WEAR
Zipped, thin layers will help tackle the cool nights and warm hikes. Depending on the time of year, rain protection may be essential.

WHAT TO TAKE
A head torch for the camp at night, your passport to enter Machu Picchu, cash to tip your porters, and a trekking pole to avoid destroying your calves.

PIT STOPS
Campsites have toilets but they are *very* basic. Some locals have also set up toilets on the trail, and there are modern facilities at Machu Picchu.

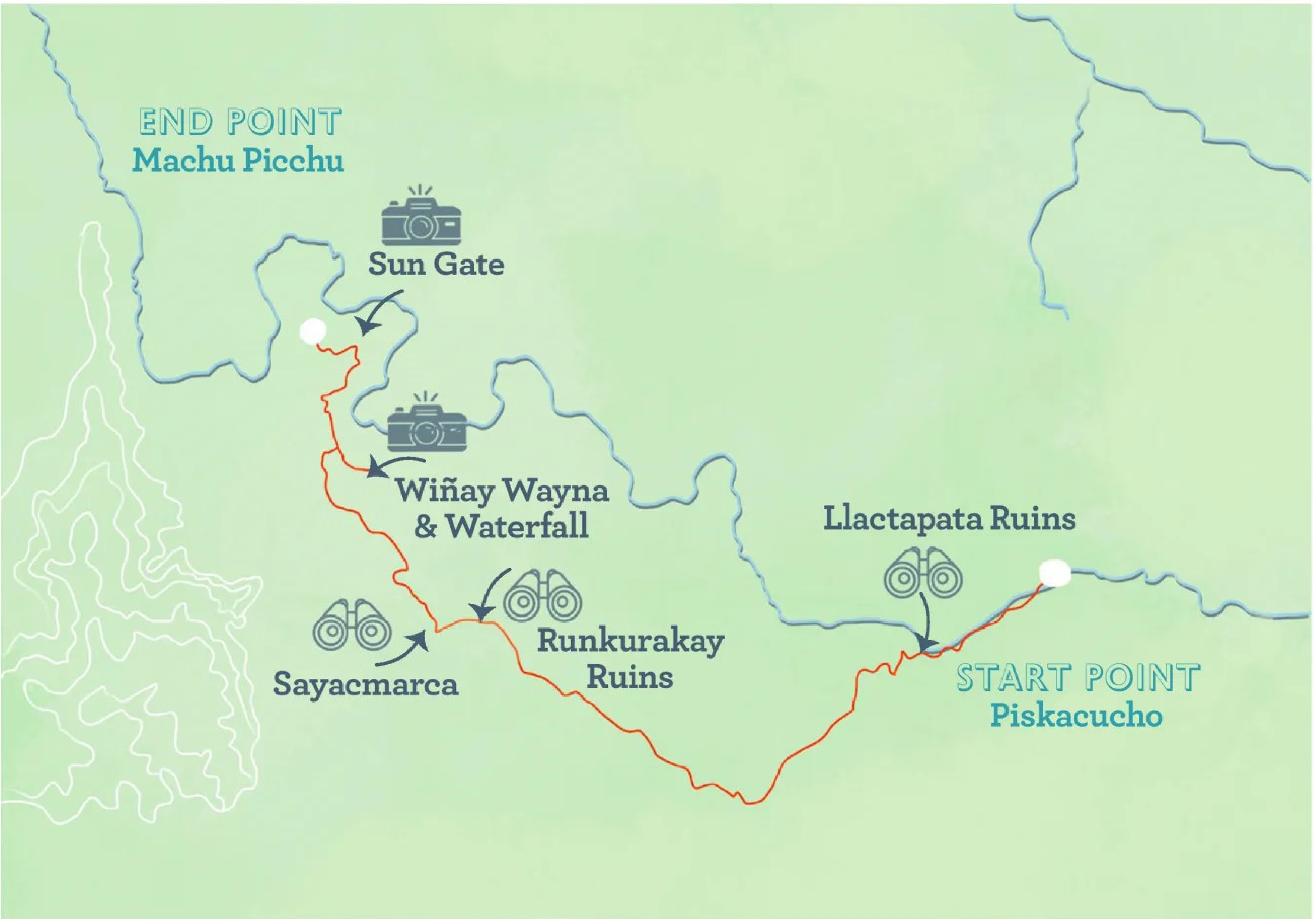
ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS
Camping spots will be handled by your tour guides, though you should look for accommodation for a couple of days pre- and post-hike in Cusco.

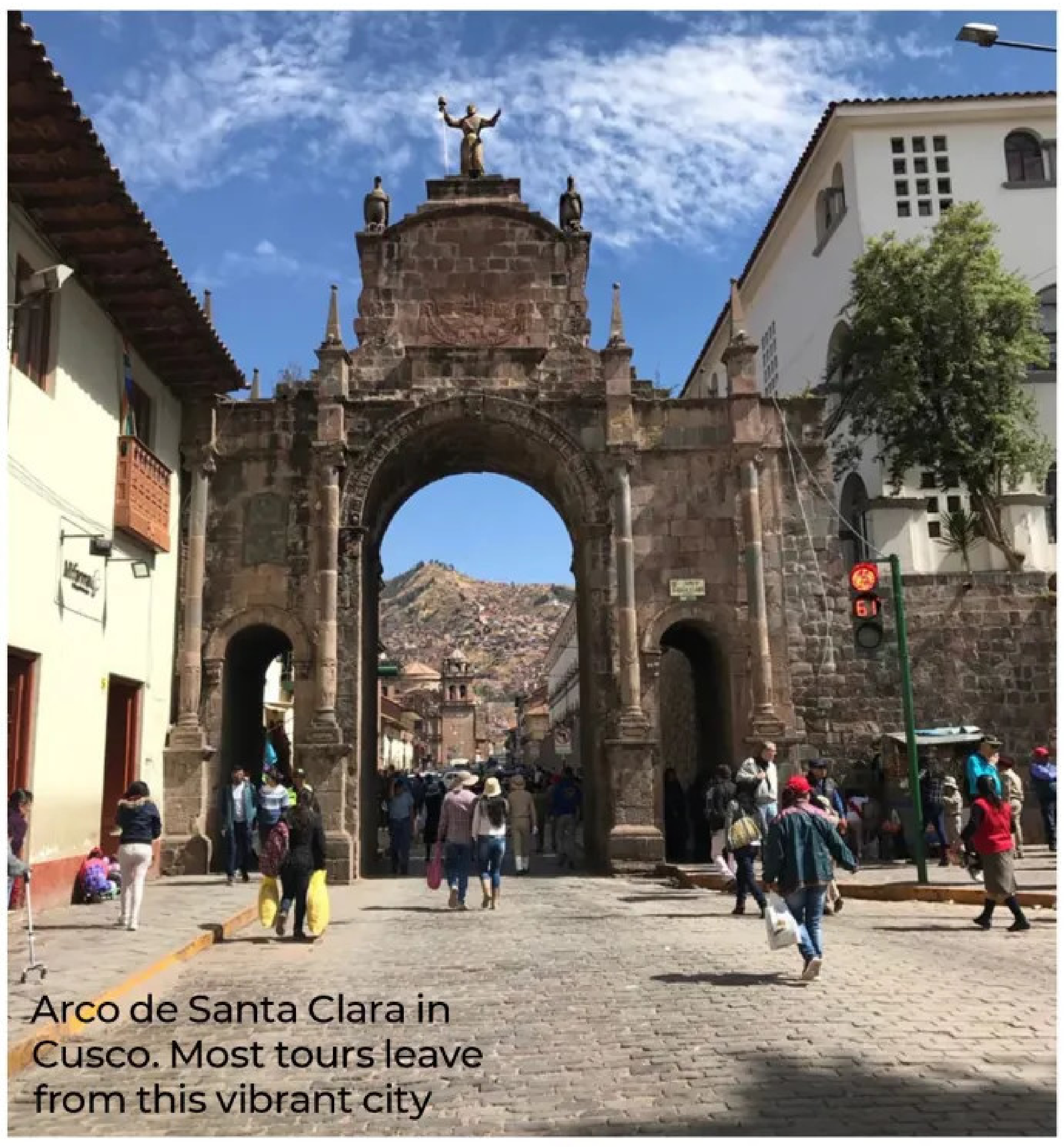
USEFUL WEBSITES
www.incatrailperu.com
www.machupicchu.gob.pe/?lang=en
www.peruhop.com/getting-from-lima-to-machu-picchu

© Pixabay; Wiki | Words: Adam Barnes

result, but because of this there is every risk that the capabilities of your group may not be consistent, which will affect your own pacing. Of course, the benefit of this is that the hikes themselves are a little more 'comfortable' than they might be if you were to arrange everything yourself, since you'll be in the hands of people who know the routes better than their own homes and take care that the collective effort of the group is well balanced. You should likely be offered coca leaves to chew on to help you adjust to the high altitudes, while some groups will be offered *cuy* (pronounced 'coo-ee') for the evening meal – grilled guinea pig, which is considered a special treat and a delicacy in Peru. The idea might make you squeamish, but you're on an adventure to make memories, right?

Your preference and interests during your time in Peru will ultimately affect the format of the trail, though most accept that the classic four-day hike is the best way to experience everything that it has to offer. Your tour guide will undoubtedly be able to help you maximise your enjoyment in this way, though since many of these are based in the nearby Cusco, it is also here that you'll likely want to start the journey – to acclimatise to the higher altitude as well as for a bit of local culture before the tour. Let's assume you'll go with the typical choice and aim for a three-night camping trip throughout the Andes. What this will ultimately mean is you actually have a fairly short hike length, comparatively at least. What this fails to overlook, of course, is the sheer height that you'll scale along the rocky, jungled paths. Even the first day, which is generally the least gruelling, runs you along an area known as the Inca Flat – and which you shouldn't mistake for actually being flat. There are a lot of ups and downs here, and even though the altitude at the close of the first day won't be vastly different from the start, your legs will already have felt that work. Most tours will take you past a number of ruins and historical sites, however, so enjoy that. The real killer is the second day, which will see you reach the highest point of the hike at Dead Woman's Pass. Though the third day will be mostly descent, this isn't always an easier exercise; you'll do well to have a trekking pole of some kind to assist with your footing here. With that in mind, day four is the reward: you'll hike up to the Sun Gate – the spot for the famed view looking down onto Machu Picchu – before entering into the ancient structure proper for your tour of the Incan royal estate.




Arco de Santa Clara in Cusco. Most tours leave from this vibrant city

COME ONE, COME ALL!

There is one thing you'll need to prepare yourself to endure on the Inca Trail that perhaps you wouldn't have expected: tourism. Like many of the world's more reputed sites of natural, historical and cultural significance, Machu Picchu sadly brings with it the drawbacks of such popularity. In fact, since there's a train that takes visitors up to the top without the satisfaction of walking those same steps as the ancient Incans before them, actually arriving at the royal estate does leave many hikers with a degree of disappointment. The inevitable curse of tourism combined with the ease with which those who just want a few extra Instagram likes can make it to the landmark means that the reward for reaching the site is perhaps more bittersweet than anything else.

This isn't to dissuade you from the hike, because it will honestly be one of the most spectacular adventures of your life; it's just good to prepare yourself for the rather large number of tourists of varying types who will also be present at the site – as much to avoid your disappointment than anything else.

New regulations that came into force in 2020 are helping to control this in some ways, but there are a few rules that you will need to consider, too. Alcohol and food cannot be brought into Machu Picchu, while backpacks of a certain size and those over 5kg are not allowed. Even the likes of selfie sticks, musical instruments, high heels and clothing intended to advertise are also all banned. Be sure to check what these restrictions are.

The train to Machu Picchu is undoubtedly a gorgeous ride, but it does mean a higher influx of tourists

The Sun Gate offers a full panoramic view of Machu Picchu and is where all those iconic photos of the royal estate originate

You'll have a number of Incan ruins as stop-off points along the way, and they'll amaze every time

Naturally, this is not a route that will come easily for even the most ardent of hikers, and that is only one part of how fulfilling it is. But of course, there are things that should be considered as a result of this, key among them being the vertical kilometres you'll be scaling. The second day will take you rather quickly up into the clouds, and the threat of altitude sickness is a very real thing. Unless you're incorporating the Inca Trail into a wider hiking adventure across the Andes and South America, there isn't really any training that can be done to avoid it. Chew on coca leaves, be aware of your own body and capabilities, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Dizziness, nausea and headaches are key things to watch for, especially when making your way to the Dead Woman's Pass. You wouldn't want to miss out on the views of the trail because you pushed yourself too far.

But then, perhaps it is about the journey after all? Machu Picchu may be the final destination, but overcoming the feat to reach it is as much a reward as seeing one of the world's most iconic ancient landmarks. At least you can take solace in the fact that if you're not keen on hiking back down some 3,000 metres (9,843 feet), then there's always the scenic route aboard a train.

© Pixabay; Wiki

A hiker takes a breather while at Gifford Pinchot National Park in Washington

USA/CANADA

PACIFIC CREST TRAIL

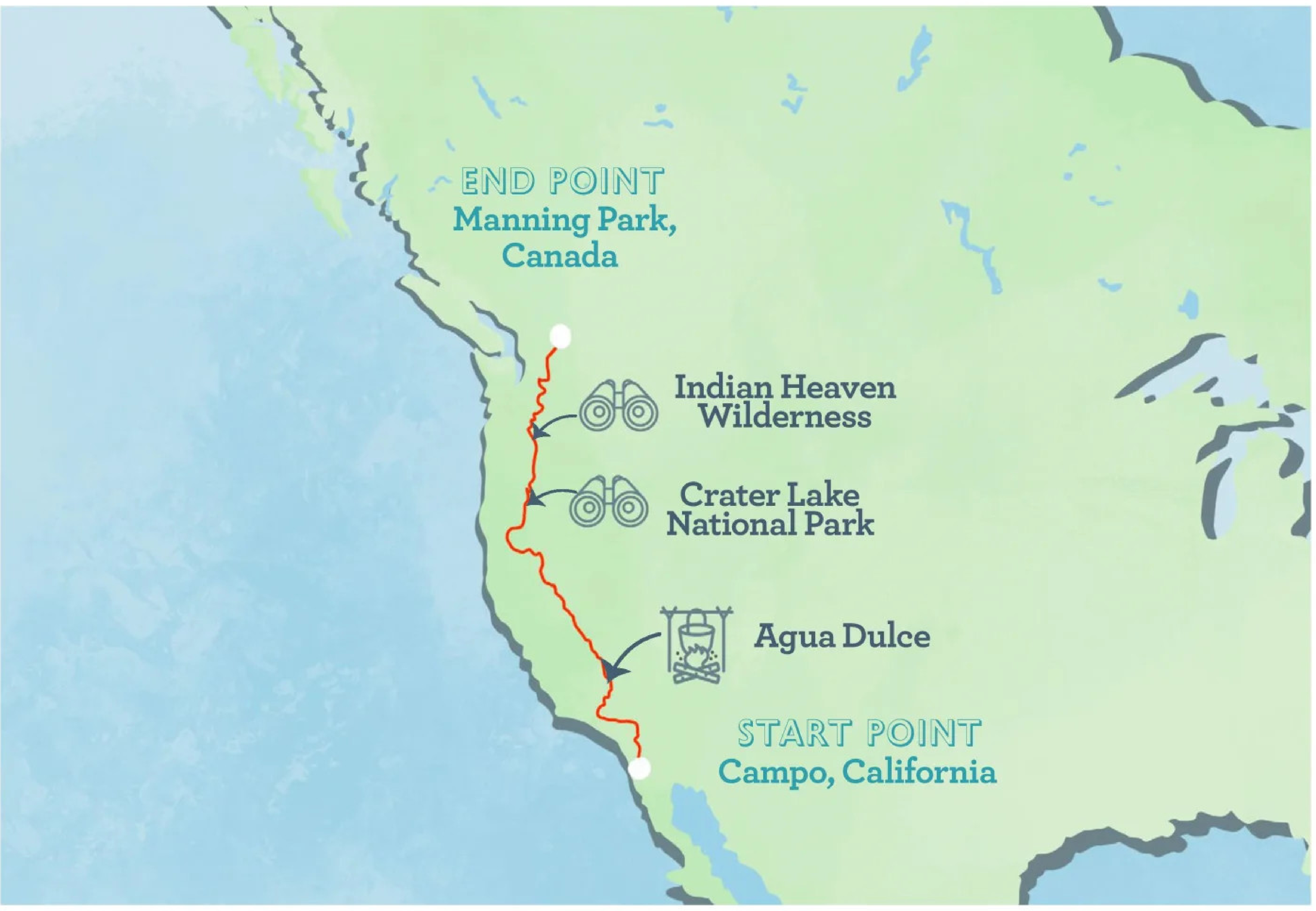
There's an abundance of beauty to behold on this route through 25 national forests and seven national parks

4,265km/2,650mi **6 months** **Difficult** **Point to Point** **131,013m/429,832ft**

If you're prepared to set aside as much as six months for your adventure, then thru-hiking this ambitious route should be high on your list of priorities. It's one of the most varied hikes on Earth, not only in terms of the terrain, but the changeable weather and the different American states you'll travel through as you journey from the border of Mexico to Canada. When all's done, you will have hiked a foot-busting 4,265 kilometres (2,650 miles).

As you'd expect, the Pacific Crest Trail is unbroken, but it took many years to bring it to fruition. It had been the brainchild of Harvard graduate and former Boy Scout Clinton C Clarke in 1932, yet the plans only began to move properly when President Lyndon B Johnson declared it as one of two national scenic trails in 1968, prompting work that would last a quarter of a century and finally be completed in 1993. Since then, many thousands have looked to hike the whole route, although many more have simply completed the more manageable sections, which are roughly 144 kilometres (90 miles) each.

Most people tackle this trail by heading north. This way, you don't have to mess around trying to enter the United States from Canada, and you'll also avoid the worst of the weather, particularly if you set off in April. You will start, then, right at the official southern terminus north of the border with Mexico, just outside the tiny incorporated community of Campo in California. You'll then head up to the gliding hotspot of Warner Springs first before making your way through the Pine Creek Wilderness and Cuyamaca Rancho State Park.



The trail will take you through some of the world's most scenic terrain, such as the Laguna and Santa Rosa mountains. It'll place you at the heart of the San Jacinto Mountains as well as 0.4 kilometres (0.25 miles) from the summit of Mount Baden-Powell, the hike taking you to 2,850 metres (9,360 feet). There will be a chance to catch your breath at Hiker Heaven in Agua Dulce and another opportunity to lose it when the trail crosses Highway 108 at Sonora Pass, the second-highest highway pass amid the stunning scenery of the Sierra Nevada. The trail also crosses County Road at Etna Summit, which is filled with beautiful wild flowers and offers amazing views.

Some 340 kilometres (211 miles) of your journey will venture through an area full of lakes and forest, through the Klamath Mountains on a rugged section that is often referred to locally as The Big Bend. Soon enough you'll be crossing into the state of Oregon, heading from the Siskiyou Summit, past quaint towns that enable you to replenish supplies, rest, wash and eat, and on through the volcanic landscape of Crater Lake National Park, where a side trail will take you to the rim if you decide to take a departure.

Of perhaps even more interest is Mount Hood, a potentially active stratovolcano, around the port side of which you will trek. Indeed, Oregon is gorgeous in most respects, thanks to the snow-capped mountains and lakes, as well the open meadows and lava fields. The Cascade Range will prove to be a highlight of the entire trip, all the way through into Washington state and on towards the Canadian border. It's a trip of many delights.

Washington has five sections of the PCT, leading from Cascade Locks, with the mountains of the Columbia River Gorge around you. The city is often used by hikers to cross the Columbia River and it's the trail's lowest point, so there's a climb to tackle as you reach the crest. This is close to the forested high plateau of the Indian Heaven Wilderness, which has more than 150 lakes. From there, you'll go on to the base of Mount Adams that takes you through fir and hemlock forests, up across lava fields and on to sub-alpine wilderness in a section packed with high passes and ridges.

Eventually, you will reach the northern terminus of the Pacific Crest Trail at the E.C. Manning Provincial Park in Canada. If you're still feeling energetic after the amazing trip you've just had, then you can take to the Lightning Lake for some canoeing, kayaking and fishing. It's time to relax!

START POINT
CAMPO, CALIFORNIA
END POINT
MANNING PARK, CANADA

GETTING THERE

If you want to thru-hike, it's best to take the number 894 bus from the El Cajon Transit Centre in San Diego to the Southern Terminus in Campo.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

For those who are travelling northbound, head off in April. If you're going the other way, try setting off in June.

WHAT TO WEAR

You'll need to seriously plan this trip. You'll be hiking in the sun some of the time, then shivering at high altitude at others, so you need to be prepared.

WHAT TO TAKE

Carry your essentials – don't overload. There are plenty of towns and post offices where you can send supplies ahead of you.

PIT STOPS

This is one long route and so there will be a good number of cafés, shops and restrooms, but not at regular intervals.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

You can camp wherever you wish, so look out for great spots and remember to always clean up after yourself.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.pcta.org
www.planyourhike.com
https://tinyurl.com/dixiepct

© Getty Images | Words: David Crookes

Watch the sunset over the Columbia River Gorge near Portland, Oregon

COLOMBIA

LOST CITY

Rediscover the forgotten ruins of a jungle city

47km/29mi | 4 days | Difficult | Out & Back | 2,650m/8,695ft

Unlike the more famous Machu Picchu, many tour groups are able to explore Ciudad Perdida with no one else around

More than 1,000 steps are the last hurdle for travellers on the path to the Lost City

It's hardly surprising that it was lost. Hidden in the heart of the jungle in Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, with 1,200 rock-carved steps towering upwards to put off anybody who made it that far, the Lost City – Ciudad Perdida in Spanish – was only rediscovered in 1972 when a group of adventurers pushed deep into the jungle in search of ancient ruins. Word trickled out when gold figurines and ceramic urns of unknown origin started to appear on the local black market and archaeologists swooped in to investigate. But according to the tribes who still live in the jungle, Ciudad Perdida was never actually lost. They say that the city of Teyuna, as they call it, has been regularly visited by members of the tribes. It was just the descendents of the Spanish conquistadors who forgot about it.

The stunning ruins of Ciudad Perdida are now the highlight of multi-day treks, some of which are guided by local tribespeople dressed in their traditional white smocks. Nature has done its best to reclaim the 169 terraces carved into the mountain to make a network of paths and plazas that probably housed around 4,000 people. Cleverly engineered bridges and drains, now covered in moss and plants, ensured the city could withstand the heavy rains that regularly drench the jungle. Archaeologists have excavated houses, ceremonial buildings, storage areas and canals, but still barely scratched the surface, and the vast majority remains untouched. Think of it as Machu Picchu for a fraction of the price and with a fraction of the crowds.

Ciudad Perdida is the highlight of the trek, but part of the fun is in getting there. All treks start at El Mamey and must be led by one of several approved tour companies. However, the lack of independence does have its benefits. Tours that are led by an indigenous guide greatly add to the cultural understanding of the modern-day jungle communities, and make possible some fleeting interactions with their notoriously shy inhabitants.

The route passes through a surprising varied landscape. The thick and humid jungle gives way to reveal watering holes – don't forget to pack a swimming costume and towel for a welcome chance to cool off – along with sweeping mountain views, waterfalls and river crossings. When the Río Buritaca is low and slow moving, trekkers hop through the water and some people bring a pair of sandals for just this eventuality. If the water level is too high to cross safely, the guides have knocked

Local tribes wear white, a colour they consider to be holy

START POINT
EL MAMEY
END POINT
EL MAMEY

GETTING THERE
Most tours depart from Santa Marta with a bone-juddering drive to the start of the walking trail at El Mamey.

WHEN TO TRAVEL
December to March, for the dry season, otherwise the paths can be very muddy.

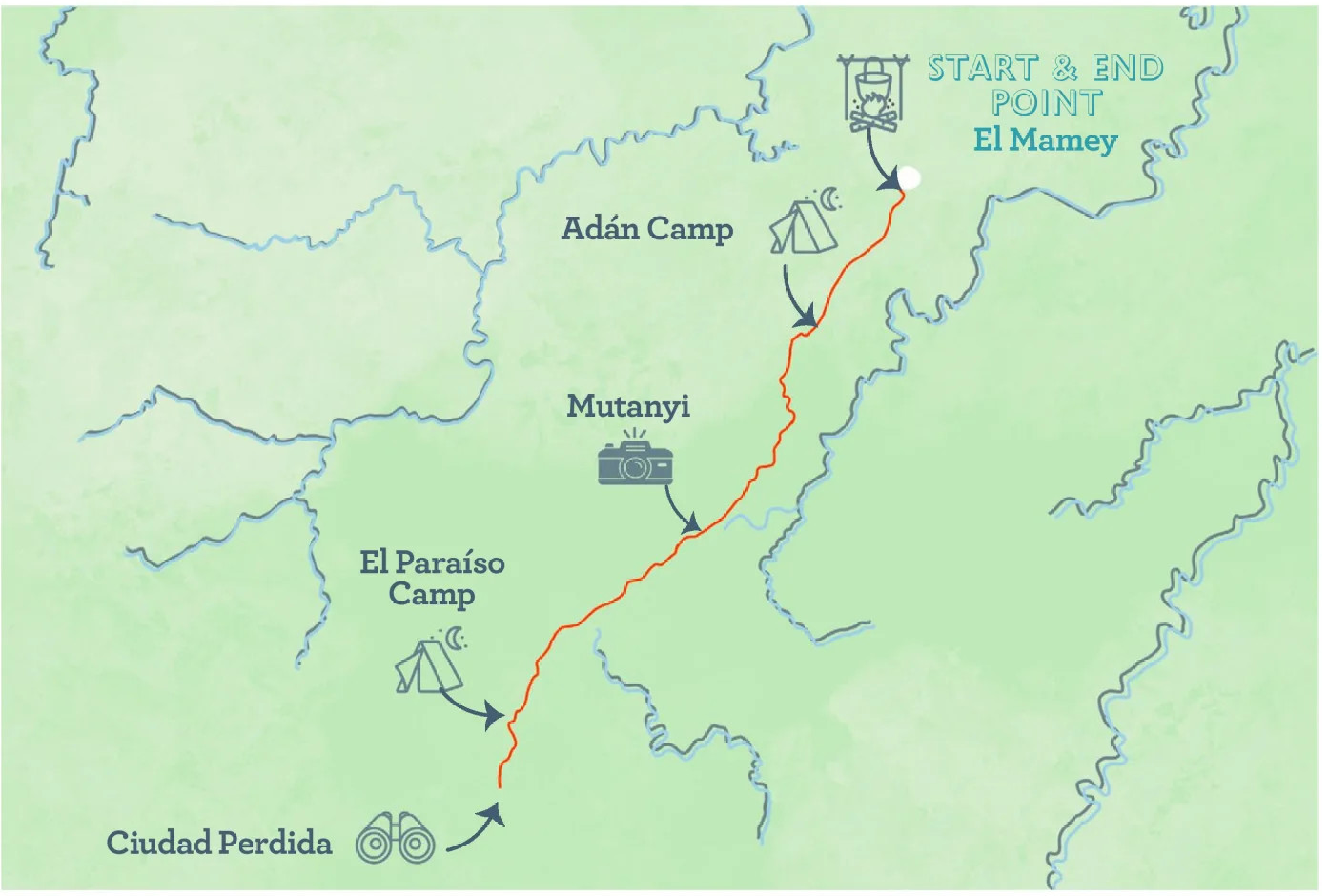
WHAT TO WEAR
Walking gear will quickly become wet due to sweat and humidity, so pack an extra set of clothes for the evenings.

WHAT TO TAKE
A dry bag to protect cameras/phones from high humidity. Insect repellent is also a good idea.

PIT STOPS
There are no facilities outside the camps along the route, although your guides may revive you with some platters of fresh fruit.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS
Expect basic bunkhouses and minimal access to electricity to charge your gadgets.

USEFUL WEBSITES
lostcitytrekcolombia.com
wiwatour.com
colombia.travel/en/santa-marta/trekking-sierra-nevada



together some ingenious contraptions to winch people across the water.

There is only one path in and out of the jungle and it is rarely flat, with some sharp inclines. The first challenging climb is only a 30-minute stroll along the path from El Mamey, a good opportunity to warm up those thighs. By the time the trek reaches El Paraíso Camp – most itineraries aim to spend the second night here – there is only one kilometre (0.6 of a mile) left until the Lost City. But it does involve 1,200 stairs, so it will probably be the slowest kilometre of the entire journey. After spending a couple of hours exploring the ruins, the return route is at least mostly downhill.

The path passes Mutanyi and Mamo, two villages of circular thatched huts similar to those that would once have stood in Ciudad Perdida. The indigenous tribes who live here determinedly continue their traditional way of life despite the ravages of Colombia's modern history. Rebels and paramilitaries have tried to displace them, drug cartels have tried to enforce coca leaf production, and herbicides have been indiscriminately dumped from helicopters in the hopes of creating massive banana plantations.

Some potential trekkers may be put off by Colombia's shady past, but the days of lawless drug gangs and tourist kidnapping have thankfully gone. Expect to share campsites with Colombian Army soldiers and to see a checkpoint at the top of the long staircase to Ciudad Perdida, but their presence is simply for reassurance.

The Lost City is lost no more to trekkers who are prepared to go off the beaten track and spend a few days in the jungle.

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USA

ANGELS LANDING TRAIL

Wiggle your way to the top of this trail for life-affirming views

8km/5mi **4-5 hours** **Difficult** **Out & Back** **454m/1,488ft**

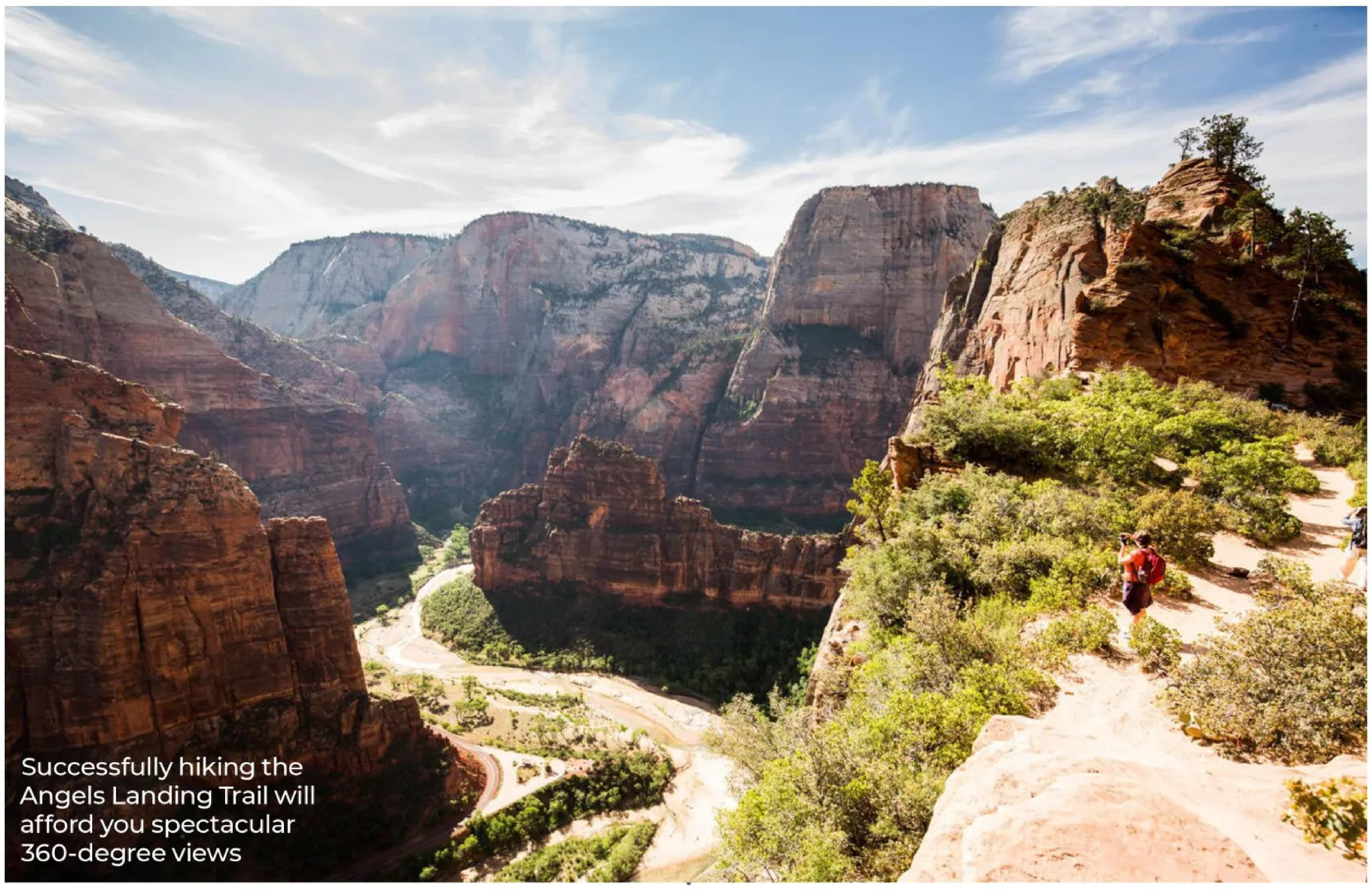
If you have a head for heights and a real hunger for danger, then even the thought of a hike up the awe-inspiring rock formation that is Angels Landing is sure to have you salivating. It will see you scaling a height of some 450 metres (1,500 feet) through some of the most hazardous terrains you could ever expect from a well-trodden and popular route, but persevere because your effort and every exhausting step will be richly rewarded. The sense of accomplishment, together with the stunning views you will enjoy at the climax, will surely live with you forever.

Everybody starts at the same point in Zion National Park – the Grotto Trailhead, where you'll park your car, stretch your legs and gear up for a two-mile portion of the West Rim Trail. Here you'll cross a bridge over the Virgin River and immediately see your task stretched out ahead of you. Fret not at this stage, however, because the first section is the easy part. Indeed, while the start of the West Rim Trail is uphill and can be hard on the legs, much of the ascent is gradual and the signposting is great. What's more, the pathway is not only well-established and cared for, it's also wide and inviting.

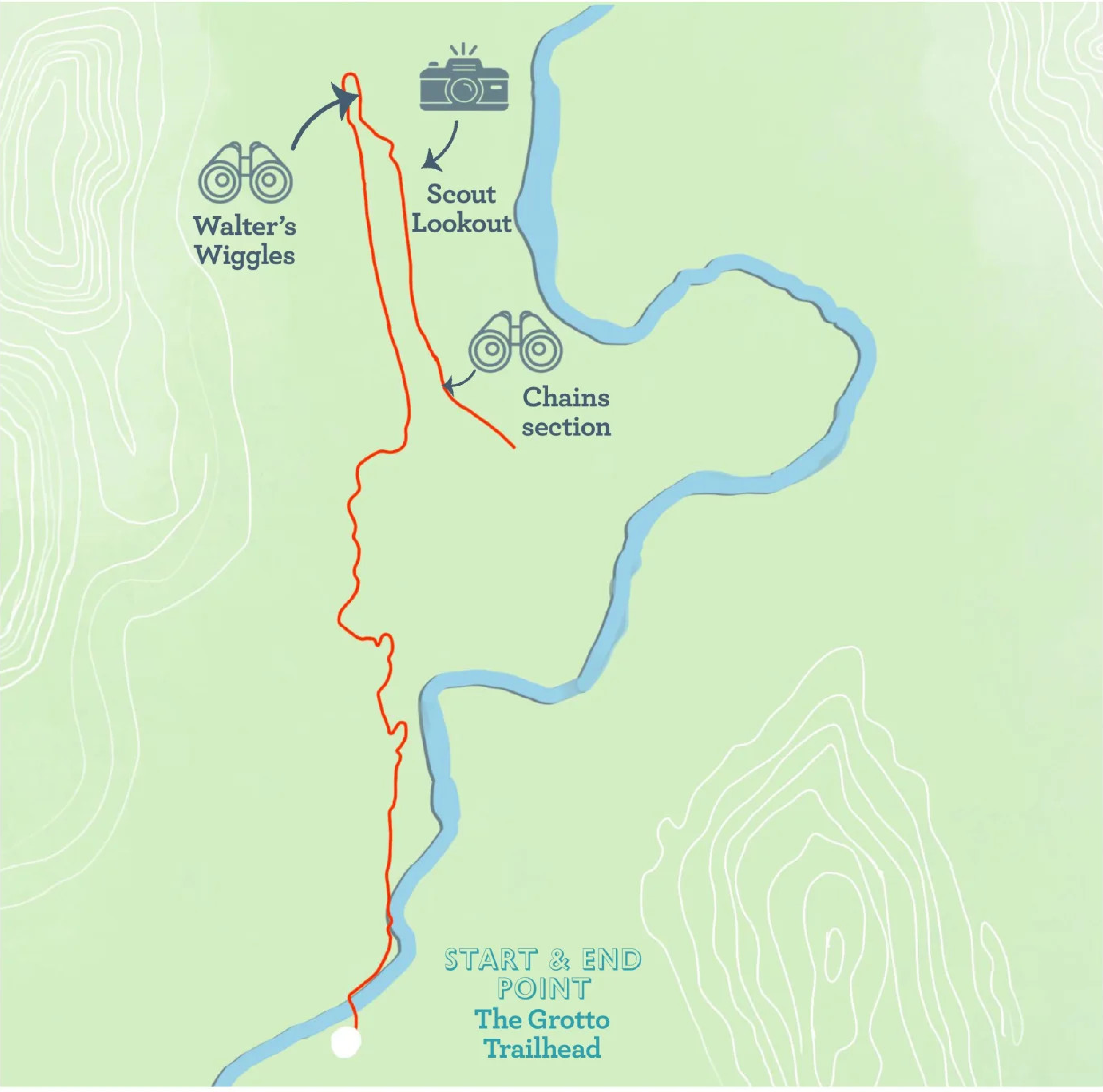
Before long, you'll cross another bridge and reach the aptly named Refrigerator Canyon, whose hanging gardens help to provide the only shaded spot on the entire hike. Once you've got yourself out of the sun and managed to both catch your breath and cool down, you'll find yourself close to two-thirds of the way to your destination, in terms of the height at least. This is where the fun and hard work really start, though, and you'll need to have a tough mind and good strong legs for what is to come. The gradual slopes will soon become a distant memory.

First, there is a section called Walter's Wiggles, which you'll need to work your way through in order to gain another 76 metres (250 feet) in height. It comprises an adventurous series of 21 steep switchbacks, each part running for around six metres (20 feet) before sharply twisting back and forth like a particularly arduous airport passport queue. The dizzying zig-zagging was the brainchild of Walter Ruesch, Zion National Park's first superintendent. He had the Wiggles carved into the rock in 1926, outlining them with a low set of bricks, but if you can imagine him having a wry smile at his creation, prepare yourself for a little cry at the next stage.

When you get to the top of Walter's Wiggles, you'll be at a location called Scout Lookout. You could easily stop here since the views above the canyon are amazing, and the achievement of getting this far may be enough for you. There are (rather smelly) restrooms available here, and it's



Successfully hiking the Angels Landing Trail will afford you spectacular 360-degree views



START POINT
THE GROTTO TRAILHEAD

END POINT
THE GROTTO TRAILHEAD

GETTING THERE

You can reach the Grotto by taking the Zion Canyon Shuttle and disembarking at the sixth stop.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Spring and autumn would be preferable because the temperature won't be as hot. In the summer, you should try to complete it earlier in the day. And avoid thunderstorms.

WHAT TO WEAR

Given the narrow path and sheer drops, sturdy walking boots are essential. Wear a hat because the sun can be relentless.

WHAT TO TAKE

Ensure you have a good supply of water and use sunscreen. Place items in a small backpack so you can keep your hands free for the climb.

PIT STOPS

There are restrooms at the Grotto and also at Scout Lookout. Take your own food along, remembering to tidy away your rubbish.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Campgrounds are located nearby and you must use these if you want to pitch up. You can also stay at Zion Lodge, the only 'in-park' lodging at Zion National Park.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.nps.gov/zion
utah.com/zion-national-park/angels-landing
www.zionlodge.com

> "THIS IS SERIOUS CLIMBING – PEOPLE HAVE DIED IN THEIR ATTEMPTS"

a good idea to take a break at this point, because anyone determined to continue on for the remaining 150 metres (500 feet) will need strong legs to finish the job. You'll be leaving the West Rim Trail and getting into tricky territory. This is serious climbing – people have died in their attempts.

You will see an intimidating set of chains on poles that have been hammered securely into the rock and they are there for a reason. Grab hold as you climb the steep steps (feel the chain shake as others grip tightly too) and make your way up, scrambling over any rocks you come across. The further you go, the more narrow the trail becomes, going down to as little as 1.37 metres (4.5 feet) wide. There are steep drops of up to 300 metres (1,000 feet) in exposed sections to both the left and right, as well as paths that can feel vertical. If you can, take some rests on the way up – that way you can concentrate the mind, give the body some respite, and minimise the risk of making a potentially fatal mistake.

Eventually (and with great relief) you will reach the top and be rewarded with 360-degree views of Zion Canyon. It's then a matter of going back the way you came, past the crowds that you'll inevitably meet along the way. You can also try to spot some wildlife, from condors flying overhead to chipmunks that seem to take the trail in their stride. Danger, it seems, is not part of their vocabulary.

The chains section of the trail is not for the faint-hearted

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ARGENTINA

LAGUNA DE LOS TRES

A whirlwind journey to the very soul of Patagonia itself, Mount Fitz Roy

22km/13mi

1 or 2 days

Easy

Out & Back

700m/2,300ft

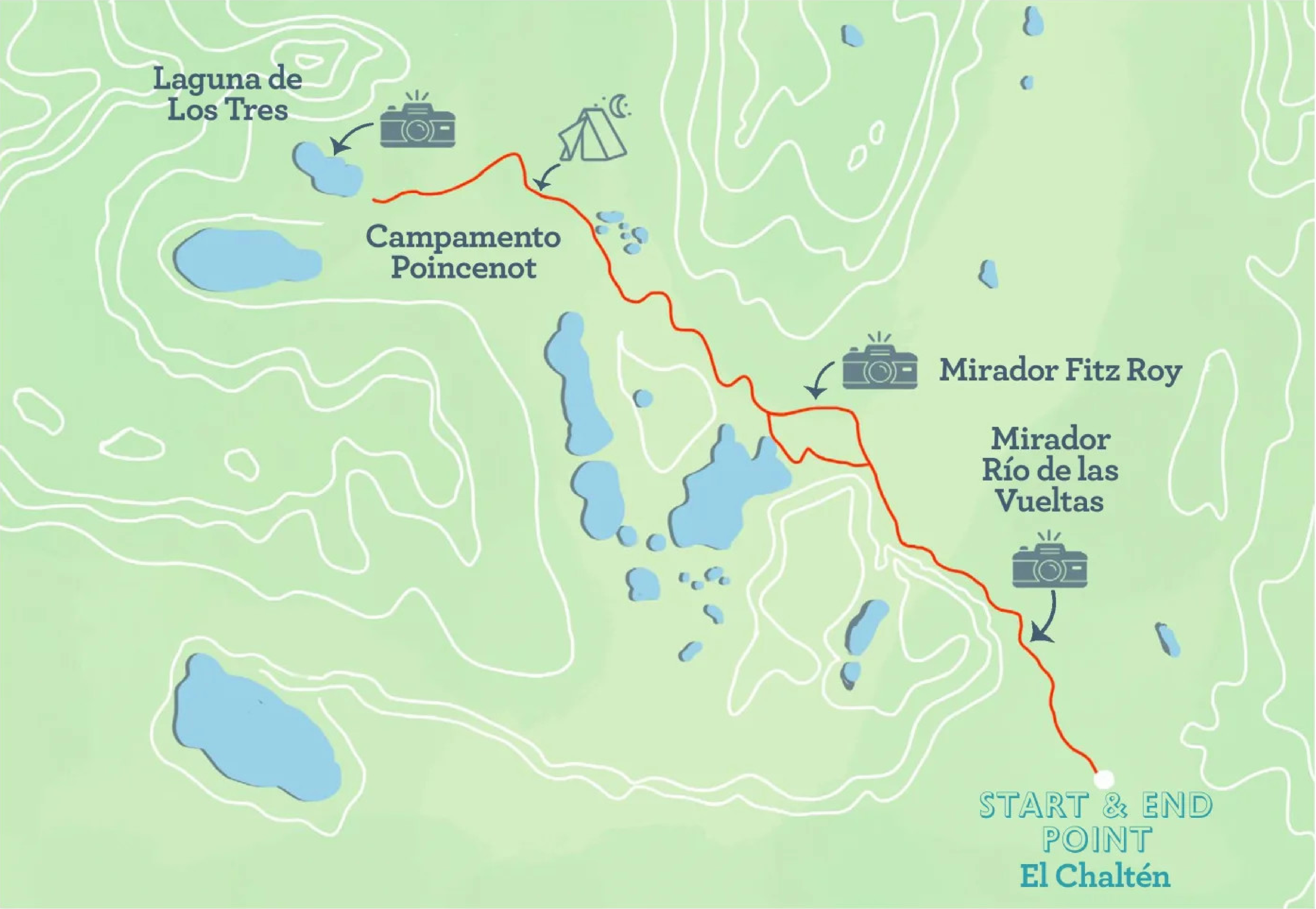
Set in the sprawling Los Glaciers National Park in Patagonia's southern reaches, Laguna de Los Tres barrels through otherworldly landscapes of vast glaciers, granite spires and native woodland. One of the most exciting hikes in the region, the 22-kilometre (13-mile) trail lures adventurers with promises of 360-degree, grandstand views of Los Tres, or The Three: Poincenot, Cerro Torre and, of course, the savagely beautiful Mount Fitz Roy. Sandwiched between Argentina and Chile, the sky-puncturing peaks of Mount Fitz Roy stand as an enduring symbol of the Santa Cruz province.

Born in the northern rim of the frontier-feel town El Chaltén – the de facto trekking capital of Argentina – the rambling trail bleeds out of Avenida San Martín, El Chaltén's main street, which is replete with cosy B&Bs, cool cafés and family-run restaurants. Climbing steeply for about 300 metres (984 feet), the trail navigates through dense, Subantarctic forests, overflowing with native ñirre and lenga trees. After gaining elevation, the trail opens out to a natural viewpoint, which looks out over the Río de las Vueltas, snaking through the valley like ribbons of shimmering glass.

From the Mirador Rio de las Vueltas, the trail weaves across canopied, temperate forests, which are home to the black and red Magellanic woodpeckers, the orange-tinged chucao tapaculo and white-throated caracaras. Underfoot, yellow-flowered calafate bushes, a symbol of Patagonia, sprout dark purple berries – according

Mount Fitz Roy's weathered peaks shoot 3,405m (11,171ft) skyward

> “THE VIEW IS BEST AT DAWN, WHEN THE SNOW-BLANKETED PEAKS ARE A FIERY SHADE OF PINK”



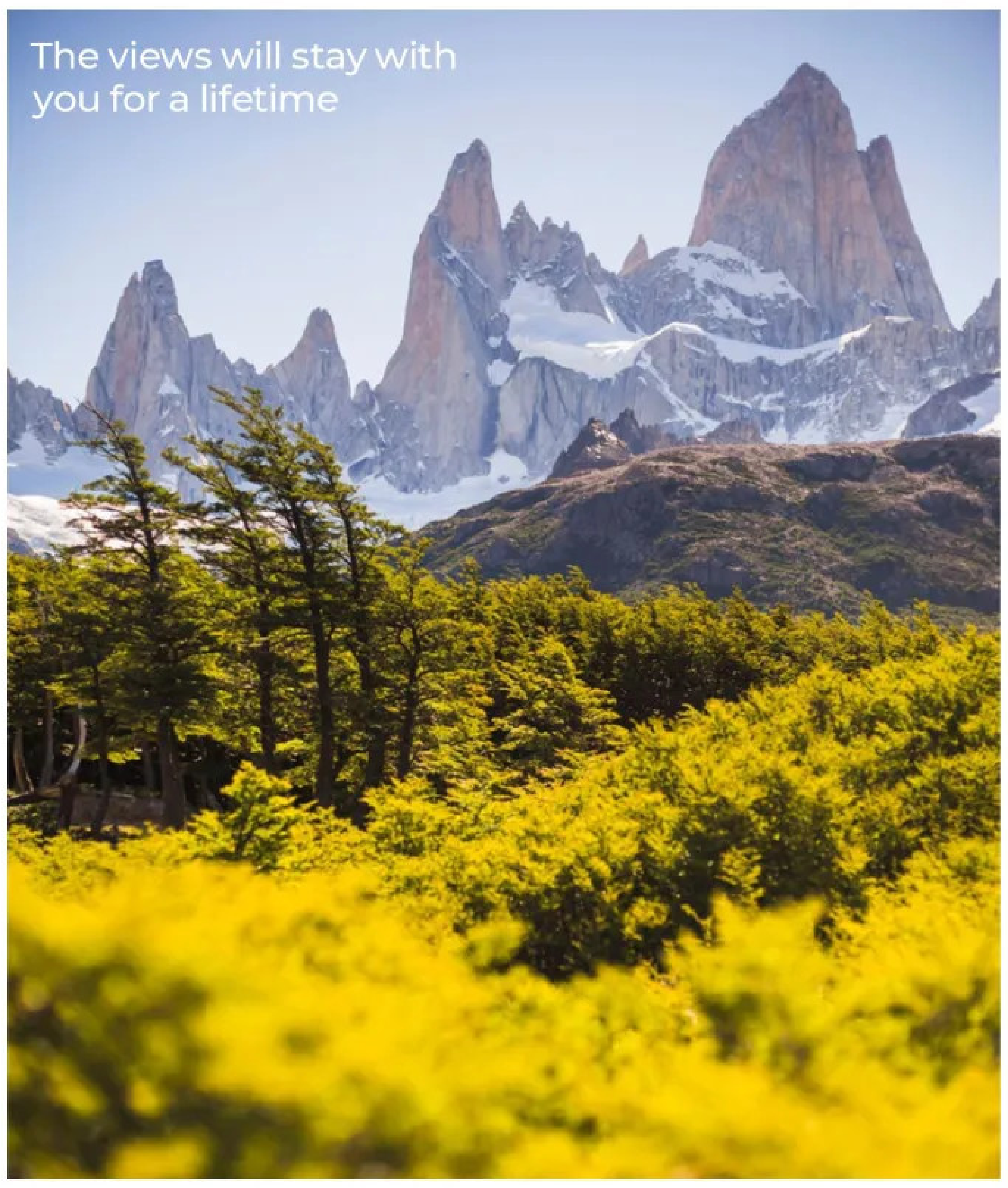
to legend, anyone who eats these sweet treats is destined to return to Patagonia. Following the signs for Mount Fitz Roy, the trail continues to climb beside the Del Salto stream. Picking through low thicket, it rolls out into a natural rocky viewpoint, Mirador Fitz Roy. Here, a first tantalising glimpse of the famous Fitz Roy massif can be enjoyed.

The trail flattens out and continues to hug the river though open plains. At times boggy and waterlogged, wooden boardwalks navigate across the swampy patch. From here, the route rolls effortlessly into Campamento Poincenot, the main campground for those who wish to split the trek into two days. Between the ancient trees, glimpses of Piedras Blancas Glacier can be admired, to the soundtrack of faraway cracks and creaks as the ice calves. Travellers keen to press ahead follow the trail as it veers westwards. After crossing the glacial-pure Río Blanco via a suspension bridge, it sweeps through Campamento Río Blanco, a campground reserved for elite mountaineers attempting to summit Mount Fitz Roy.

The trail then quickly ascends 400 metres (1,312 feet), over loose scree and around gigantic boulders. Passing a false crest, the crest proper falls away to reveal the cobalt blue, iceberg-dotted waters of the Laguna de Los Tres. Erupting from behind the lagoon, Mount Fitz Roy’s jagged peaks shoot 3,405 metres (11,171 feet) up, like gnarled and jagged teeth, puncturing the pure Patagonian sky.

Carved by wind, snow and ice over millennia, the granite monolith was known to the indigenous Tehuelche as El Chaltén, meaning ‘The Mountain that Smokes’, thanks to a cloak of cloud that clings perpetually to its summit. While always spectacular, it’s said that the view is best at dawn, when the snow-blanketed peaks are painted a fiery shade of pink. Beside Fitz Roy’s fantastic pyramid, the granite spire of Cerro Poincenot stands to attention. Just behind, the needle-like finger of Cerro Torre stretches heavenward, its summit exploding into a cushion of ice and mist.

After taking in the view, a detour circles the banks of Laguna de Los Tres and nudges towards the viewpoint of the desolate Laguna Sucia and the hanging Glaciar Río Blanco, which feeds the lake. Curling back to the main trail, the route descends through ancient glaciated valleys and magical deciduous forests, which offer welcome protection from the winds whipping off the nearby ice fields. Those quiet enough may catch a rare glimpse of South Andean huemul deer foraging for food. Following the signposts, the trail diverts to Laguna Capri, also known as Laguna Pato, a strikingly beautiful lake. Tranquil and crystal-clear, reflections of distant snow-blanketed peaks can be spotted on its glassy surface. Wrapping back towards the main trail, hikers retrace their steps, sliding downhill, back to the hip enclave of El Chaltén, where hearty meals and warm beds await.


The views will stay with you for a lifetime

START POINT
EL CHALTÉN

END POINT
EL CHALTÉN

GETTING THERE
El Chaltén can be reached by car, bus or flight via El Calafate.

WHEN TO TRAVEL
October and April for pleasant weather and clear skies.

WHAT TO WEAR
The wind can be ferocious, so hats and neck gaiters are recommended.

WHAT TO TAKE
Camping gear for those hoping to split the journey into two days.

PIT STOPS
There are no cafés or restaurants on the trail, so food and water will need to be carried. Basic toilets are found near the campsites.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS
The hippy hiking town of El Chaltén is the ideal base for hiking Laguna de Los Tres.

USEFUL WEBSITES
losglaciares.com
elchalten.com
serac.com.ar

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THE AMERICAS

BEST OF THE REST

These hikes offer a variety of experiences from mountain treks to leisurely lakeside walks and challenging terrain with exceptional natural beauty

ICEBERG LAKE

Montana, USA

A hike of 15.4km (9.6mi), Iceberg Lake, nestled within the boundaries of Glacier National Park in Montana, is often rated moderately challenging. The 427m (1,400ft) elevation may be a consideration in itself for some, and the trek begins with a steep gradient. However, it soon levels off and provides the visitor with incredible views of the Rocky Mountains and the placid Iceberg Lake itself. Timing is everything to maximise the experience: arriving too early in the season might mean that the lake is frozen, while arriving too late could lead to views of the lake in its water-only state. However, experiencing this hike during the late winter or early spring may well reveal floating icebergs and spectacular images of the lake in seasonal transition. Lingering for a while to enjoy the abundant wildlife – including moose, bears or mountain goats – is encouraged, and those maintaining a leisurely pace might complete the Iceberg Lake hike in just a few well-spent hours. It's A+ terrain for grizzly bears, so be sure to pack bear spray!

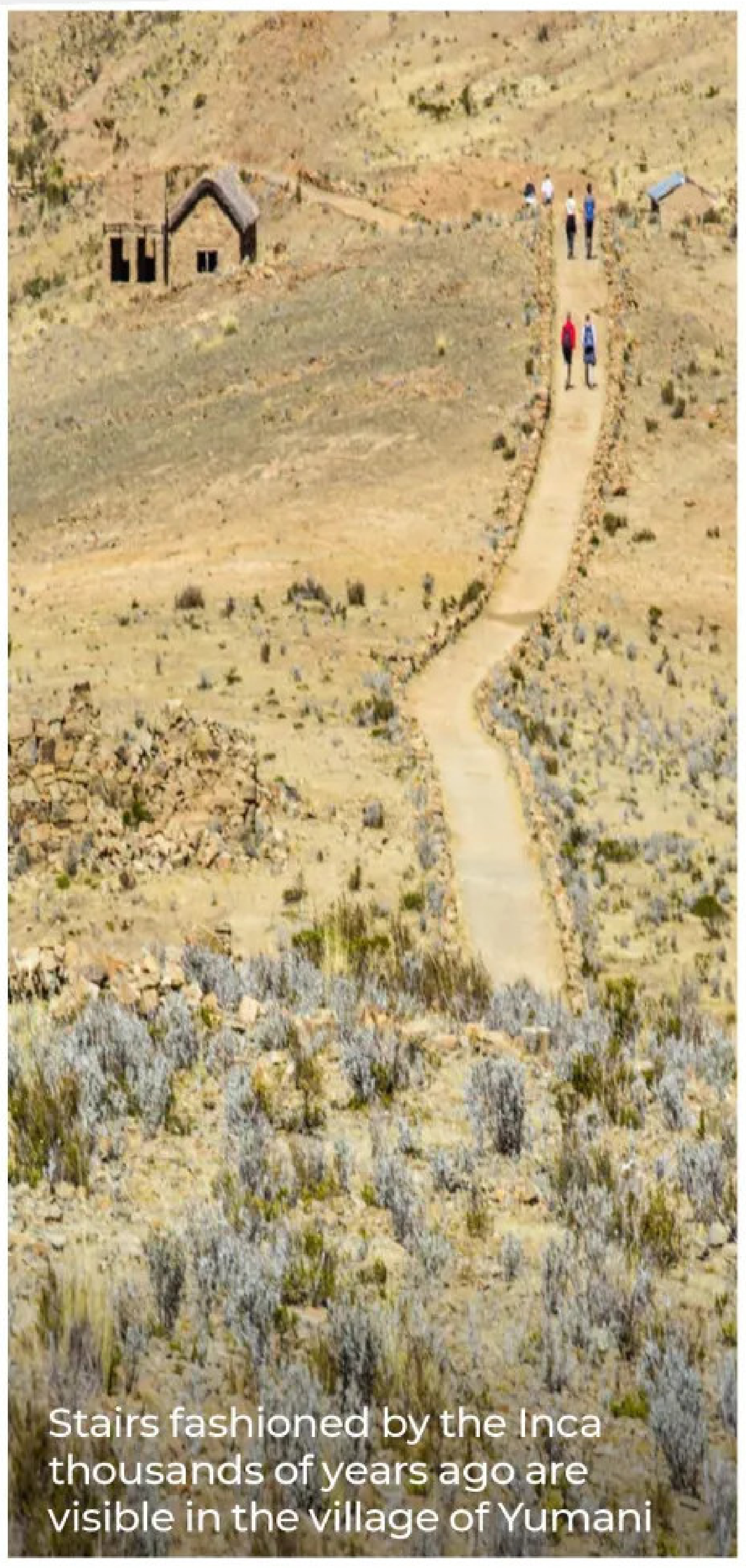
Iceberg Lake and its glorious hiking opportunities are located in Glacier National Park

© WIKI

ISLA DEL SOL

Bolivia

The cradle of Incan civilisation includes the deep azure waters of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia. One of the best hikes to experience the lake's natural beauty while taking in Incan ruins is the 8km (4.9mi) Isla del Sol route. Taking the ferry from the town of Copacabana on the shore of Lake Titicaca, visitors will find an island that is dotted with small villages and remnants of Incan splendour. The rocky terrain presents a moderate to strenuous hike, and sections of the experience involve altitudes above 4,000m (13,123ft). The Willa Thaki trail leads from the village of Cha'llapampa in the north to the southern village of Yumani, and traverses the entire length of Isla del Sol. The hike is not technical, but it can be challenging for novices.



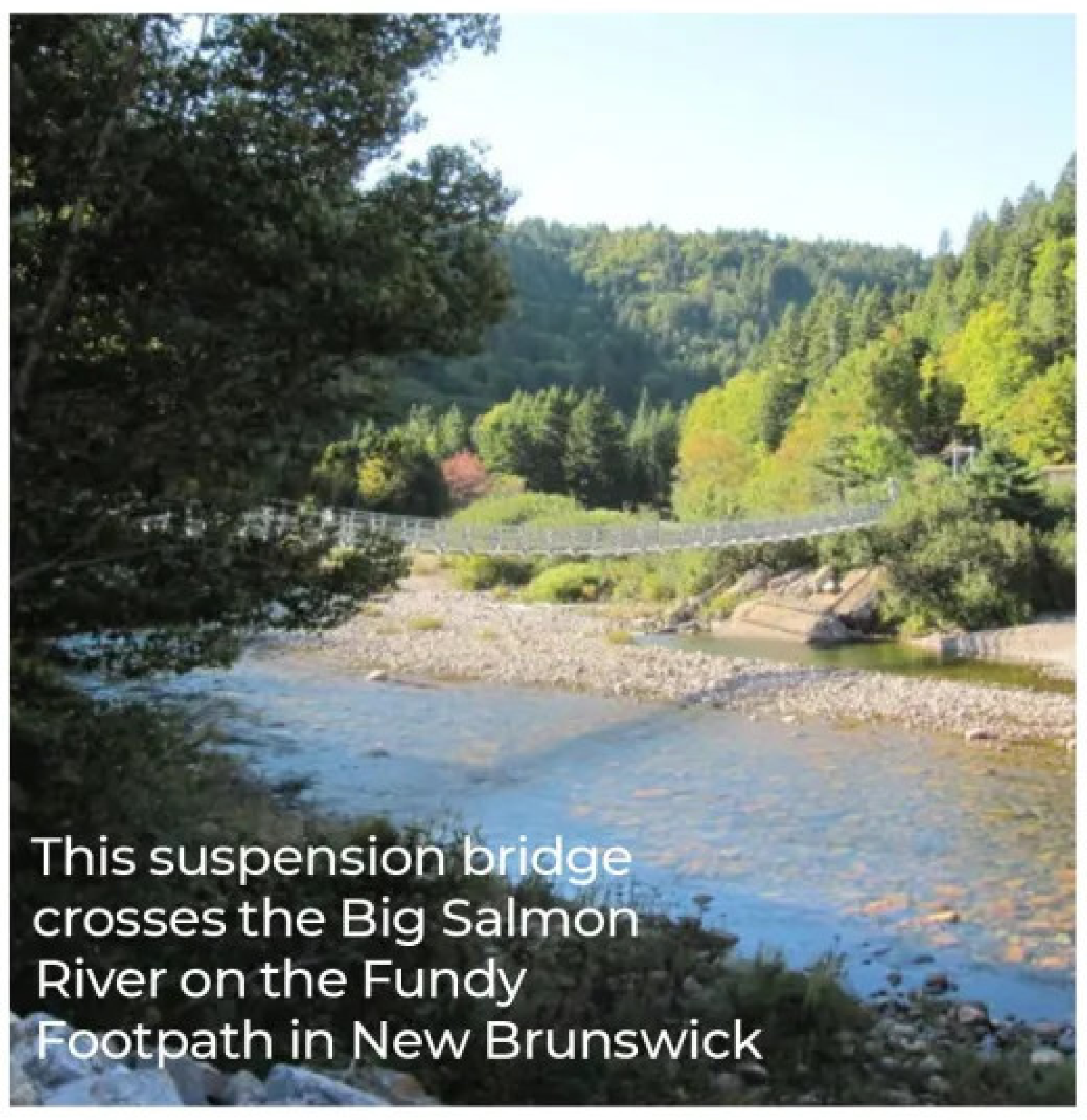
Stairs fashioned by the Inca thousands of years ago are visible in the village of Yumani

© Getty Images

FUNDY FOOTPATH

New Brunswick, Canada

Stretching 41km (25mi) from the Big Salmon River to the Fundy National Park in the Canadian province of New Brunswick, the Fundy Footpath is, for now, the hiking trail less travelled. The footpath was blazed in the early 1980s by hiker Jack McKay, and enjoyed a surge of interest in the late 1980s after reestablishment. With an overall elevation climb of approximately 3,000m (9,842.5ft), it joins the 33km (20.5mi) Fundy Trail in the confines of the national park. A word of caution: the picturesque footpath winds along and through cliffs and marshes, old-growth forests, streams and beaches punctuated by gruelling switchbacks and rugged descents. At times, the trail is the width of only a hiker's two feet. Thus, only experienced hikers should attempt the Fundy Footpath. Traversing the length of the footpath requires good physical conditioning and a commitment of approximately four days. Overnight gear is a must.



This suspension bridge crosses the Big Salmon River on the Fundy Footpath in New Brunswick

© WIKI/ Leonora Enking

Grand Teton rises majestically above Lake Solitude along the Teton Crest Trail

© Getty Images

TETON CREST TRAIL

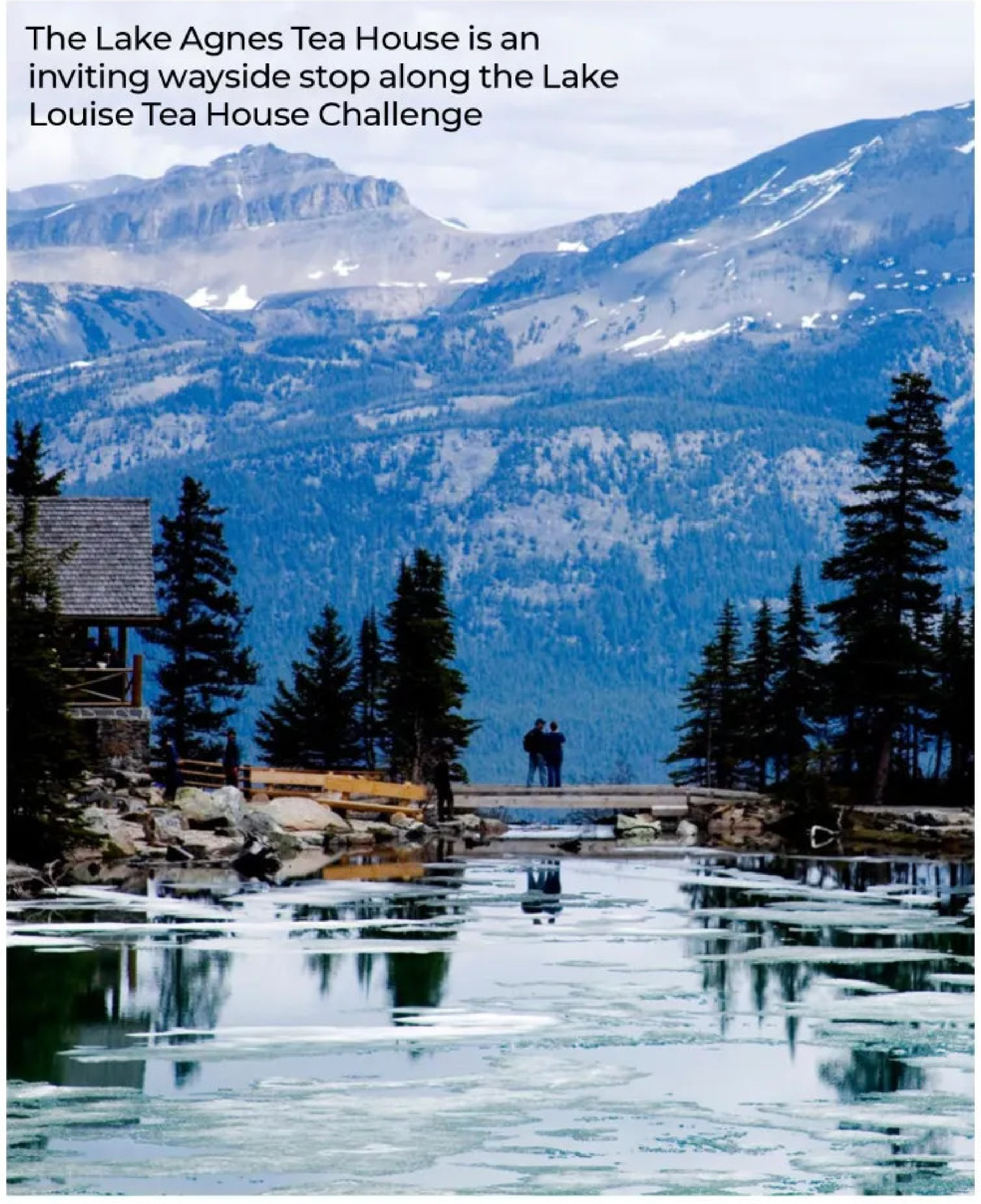
Wyoming, USA

Taking two to five days, depending on the preferred route, the Teton Crest Trail in Wyoming will prove to be the adventure of a lifetime. The trail courses along 56-72km (35-45mi) of serpentine traces through the Grand Teton National Park, linking the Bridger Teton and Targhee National Forests and serene String Lake. The trail includes open meadows strewn with wildflowers, mountain passes, wide basins and stunning views of the Teton Mountain Range, one of the most beautiful in the Americas. The hike is moderately challenging, and camping areas within the national park make a longer adventure more easily planned. Only three campsites in the area don't require a permit, so it's best to book one at **www.recreation.gov**. Several access points allow a start and completion that match the hiker's itinerary and interests, and one of the most popular activities is the Jackson Hole Aerial Tram from Teton Village Resort to the top of Rendezvous Mountain. Prices range from £20-30 ($27-42).

LAKE LOUISE TEA HOUSE CHALLENGE

Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada

Winding through Banff National Park in Alberta, the Lake Louise Tea House Challenge includes a 14.6km (9.1mi) loop from the Fairmont Chateau Hotel along a moderately rated switchback path that gains more than 365m (1,200ft) in altitude. Hikers traverse towering forests of fir and spruce trees to reach Lake Agnes Tea House, where light fare is available. From there, the Little Beehive or Big Beehive route yields beautiful views of Lake Louise and Bow Valley. Following the Highline Trail to the Plain of Six Glaciers Trail, the Victoria Glacier and soaring Canadian Rockies come into view. A second stop to refresh at the Plain of Six Glaciers Tea House is well worth the time, and the trek's average duration is approximately five hours.


The Lake Agnes Tea House is an inviting wayside stop along the Lake Louise Tea House Challenge

© Alamy

CHAPADA DIAMANTINA CIRCUIT

Bahia State, Brazil

The grand circuit of Brazil's Chapada Diamantina covers more than 100km (62mi) of varied and captivating natural beauty. The national park has plenty of trails, but they're not clearly marked and the park is huge, so arrange for a guide to assist with lodging and meals, as well as planning the route. Accomplished and ambitious hikers will find plenty of challenging terrain while experiencing lush valleys and open plains along with numerous waterfalls, one of the most memorable being Cachoeira de Fumaça – much of the water evaporates into a mist at the bottom, while underground rivers and hidden caves contribute to the varied and verdant landscape. You'll need sturdy shoes and plenty of hiking experience for the trek to Morro do Pai Inácio, as it winds across steep hillsides to a panoramic vantage point revealing glorious views.

Sunlight splashes across Chapada Diamantina from the vantage point of Morro do Pai Inácio

© WIKI/Cleide Isabel

BUCKSKIN GULCH

Utah, USA

The narrow slot canyon of Buckskin Gulch is readily apparent at Wire Pass

© WIKI/ Jason J. Corneveaux

Many experienced hikers consider Buckskin Gulch the best slot canyon trek in the western United States. Meandering 24km (15mi), the terrain is rocky at times, tunnelling between towering walls of red rock that often block the sun and plunge some length of the trail into darkness. Although it is not technical, the Buckskin Gulch is strenuous with rocks that must be climbed over, and potholes that often fill with water and must be waded or even swum across. The route lies along the Utah-Arizona border, and temperatures may soar in the desert climate – plenty of water is a necessity. Hikers must also be prepared for the sudden onset of inclement weather, and flash flooding may strike with little warning. You will need a permit to hike the area so be sure to book.

Words: Mike Haskew

LOOK OUT FOR THESE SYMBOLS OVER THE FOLLOWING PAGES

- DISTANCE
- DURATION
- DIFFICULTY
- ROUTE TYPE
- ELEVATION GAIN
- PHOTO OPPORTUNITY
- PLACE TO STAY
- PLACE OF INTEREST
- PLACE TO EAT

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EUROPE

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TOUR DU MONT BLANC, FRANCE/ITALY/SWITZERLAND

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SOUTH WEST COAST PATH, ENGLAND

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LAUGAVEGUR, ICELAND

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CAMINO DE SANTIAGO, SPAIN/FRANCE

58
GR20, FRANCE

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WEST HIGHLAND WAY, SCOTLAND

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KUNGSLEDEN, SWEDEN

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ALTA VIA 1, ITALY

68
RYSY, HIGH TATRAS, SLOVAKIA/POLAND

70
BEST OF THE REST

The views at Lac Blanc are an unforgettable climax to the TMB route

FRANCE/ITALY/SWITZERLAND

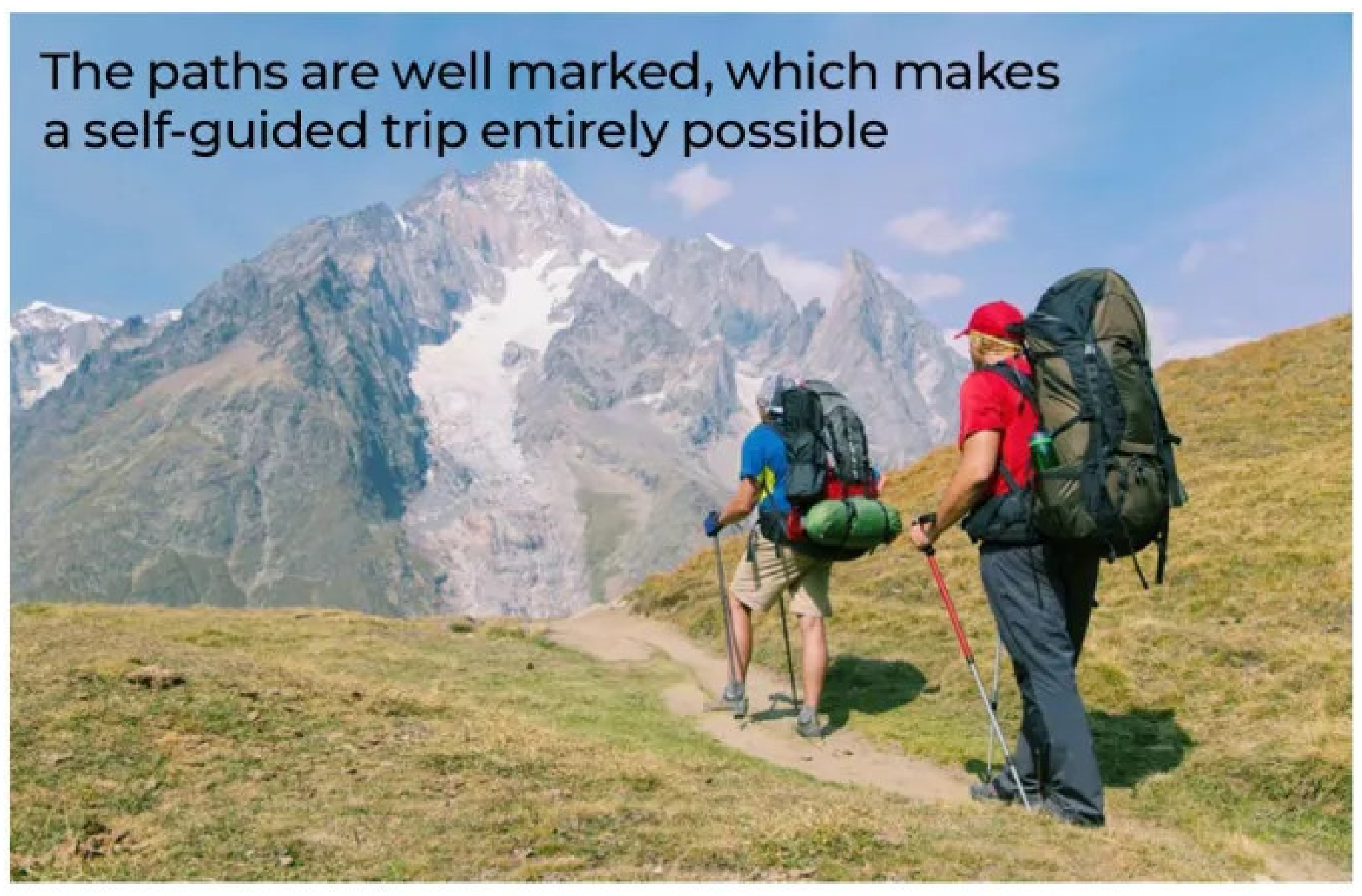
TOUR DU MONT BLANC

This world-famous alpine hike that will put you on top of the world

170km/105.6mi | 11 days | Difficult | Loop | 9,997m/32,800ft

If you want a classic European hike route, they don't get more evergreen (in more ways than one!) than the Tour du Mont Blanc (often referred to as the TMB). The 170-kilometre (105.6-mile) circular alpine route passes through seven valleys and three countries, and it's a plum choice for both its beauty and versatility. The route can be tackled and conquered in just four days by the fittest hikers, but most people allow a little longer (10-11 days is usual) to enjoy the views and let their bursting lungs and hearts, and tired legs, recover. Mountain bikers also traverse the route and there's the famous TMB ultramarathon in late August/early September each year, which takes an eye-watering 24 hours to complete. When planning your trip, it's best to note the dates for the ultra and avoid them.

TMB is in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of France. The route is circular and often done in an anti-clockwise direction for the best views of Mont Blanc. It's rated as difficult due to the numerous ups and downs,


The paths are well marked, which makes a self-guided trip entirely possible

but the trail is well marked so you can choose to do it either unguided or guided. The route passes from France to Italy to Switzerland and back into France, and the path is considered safe from snow from the end of June to September.

The terrain is a mix of cols, ridges, crags, paths, grassland, mountain meadows and pine-scented woodlands – and there's even a bit of Roman road! The views are stunning and the wildlife is plentiful – from wild alpine goats, chamois, deer and ibex to lizards, snakes and more marmots than you can shake a stick at. As always, try not to look at the footpath all the time – a glimpse up high once in a while may reward you with the sight of an eagle circling.

The route starts in Les Houches, where you'll ascend from the Chamonix valley to Col de la Croix du Bonhomme, a peak of 2,483 metres (8,146 feet) with great views of the Vanoise National Park and the southernmost tip of the route. Heading north-east, the Refuge des Mottets could well be your first taste of mountain hut accommodation and it has a very traditional flavour. A former dairy farm, it's oozing alpine charm and warmth; it's also the place to try local Beaufort cheese, a cow's milk hard slab that somehow manages to taste of the flower meadows its dairy herd were grazing on.

Before long you'll make your first border cross, into Italy. You'll soon reach the route's second-highest peak: the Col de la Seigne at 2,516 metres (8,255 feet). Just past it, Rifugio Elisabetta is definitely worth a stop, if only for a delicious lunch, with the bonus of being able to roll down the hill afterwards!

The Mont de la Saxe ridge is one of the highlights of the official TMB route, many times christened the best ridge hikers have ever conquered, and providing panoramic, breathtaking views of meadows at the top. The ascent is very steep and grassy, and you may find yourself slipping backwards. Your reward for the effort should really be a night at the stellar Rifugio Walter Bonatti, named after the famous climber who died in 2011, and where, if you're lucky, you could experience one of the best sunsets of your life.

No rest for the wicked, as the next tranche of the loop will see you climbing up to Grand Col Ferret, the highest col on the loop at 2,537 metres (8,323 feet), and one that looks over the awesome triumvirate of Grandes Jorasses, Grand Combin and Mont Dolent – the latter of which lies on the border of France, Italy and Switzerland.

Switzerland can lay claim to having one of TMB's crowdpleasers firmly in its grip – the ascent via Fenêtre d'Arpette to the highest altitude point of the hike (2,665 metres (8,743 feet)) and mouth-gaping views of the Trient glacier. Many times of the year this route isn't possible, so you're probably best sticking to the marked route, via Alp Bovine to the Col de la Forclaz, instead. Stop at Refuge de la Balme for a bowl of something warm and restorative, and maybe try a local beer called L'Echappée as you enter into the last couple of days of the circuit.

Our final pick of the path is Lac Blanc. It's a terrifyingly steep climb (requiring ladders and rails in places) and balcony trail – sometimes dubbed 'the greatest short walk in the world' – and the views of Mont Blanc from the top are something you'll remember for the rest of your life.

START POINT

LES HOUCHES, CHAMONIX VALLEY

END POINT

LES HOUCHES, CHAMONIX VALLEY

GETTING THERE

Chamonix is a mountaineering and snowsports capital so is well served by public transport. The closest airport is Geneva.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Late June to September is considered the safest time to go; the snow will have mostly gone, and the flora and fauna are particularly beautiful.

WHAT TO WEAR

Lightweight boots and shorts are sufficient, as long as there are warm clothes and waterproofs in your backpack. Trekking poles are useful.

WHAT TO TAKE

Essentials are sunglasses, a hat, sunscreen, lip protection and a water bottle. If you're hiking in early season, you might need an ice axe, too.

PIT STOPS

There are plenty of places to eat en route – mostly of the traditional alpine farm variety, with more modern options in the larger villages.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

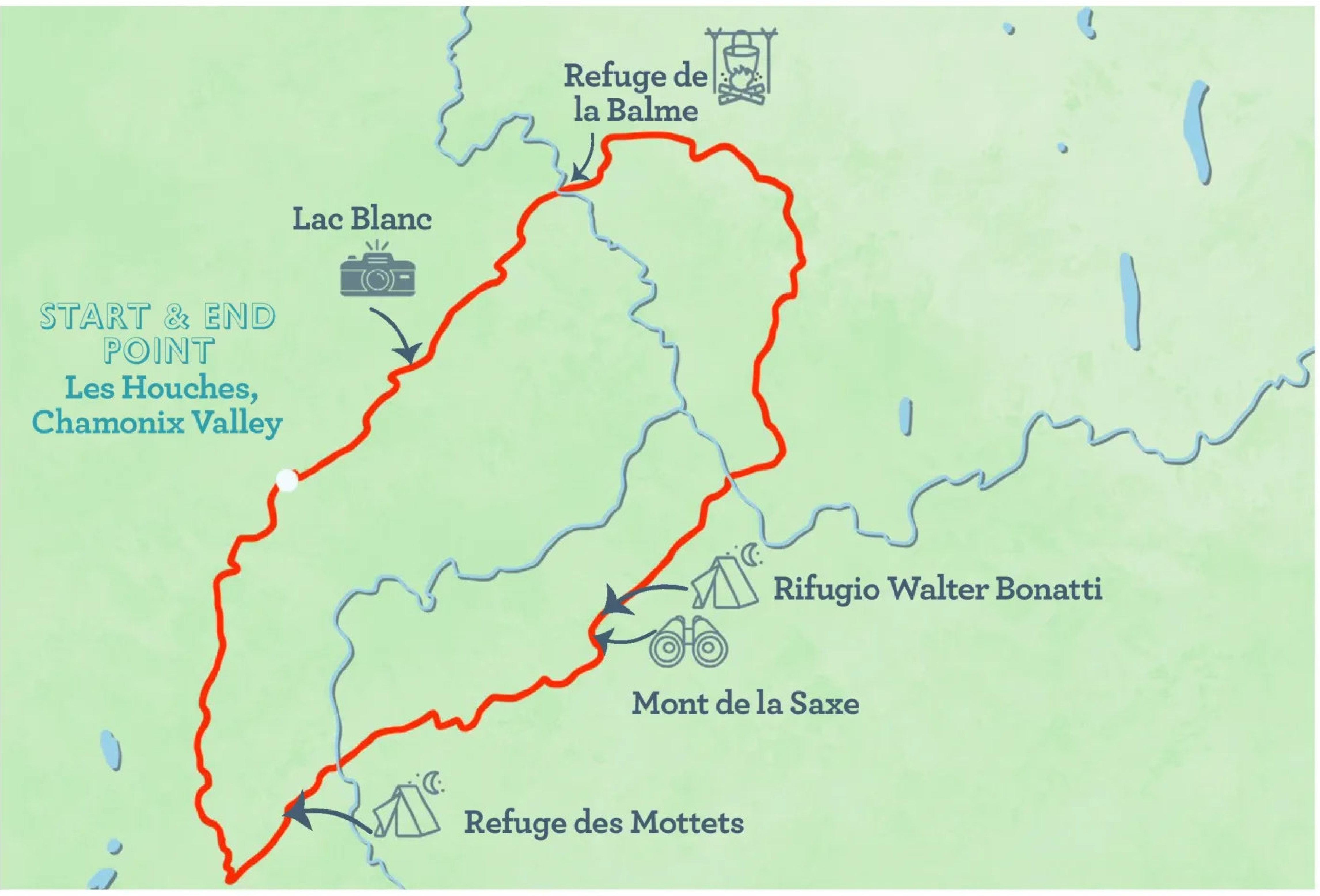
Accommodation on offer is plentiful and varied, from camping and refuges (mountain huts with food) to guest houses and hotels.

USEFUL WEBSITES

chamonix.net

www.autourdumontblanc.com

www.atout-france.fr



© Getty Images; Free Vector Maps | Words: Rachel Ifans

Durdle Door draws tourists from all over the world

ENGLAND

SOUTH WEST COAST PATH

Britain's best-loved hike spans four counties, more than 600 miles and plenty of pubs

1,014km/630mi **7-8 weeks** **Moderate** **Point to Point** **35,052m/115,000ft**

Clocking in at a vast 1,014 kilometres (630 miles), the South West Coast Path clings to the breathtaking shoreline like a barnacle. Winding its way through sandy beaches, windswept clifftops, narrow valleys and secret coves, it's a walk through millions of years of British history – from the age of the dinosaurs to the Industrial Revolution and beyond. Though it can be steep and demand adventurous clambering in places, it's ideal for the novice hiker in that it's well-signposted throughout, doesn't require a guide, and has plenty of accessible facilities, accommodation, car parks and tasty cream teas along the way.

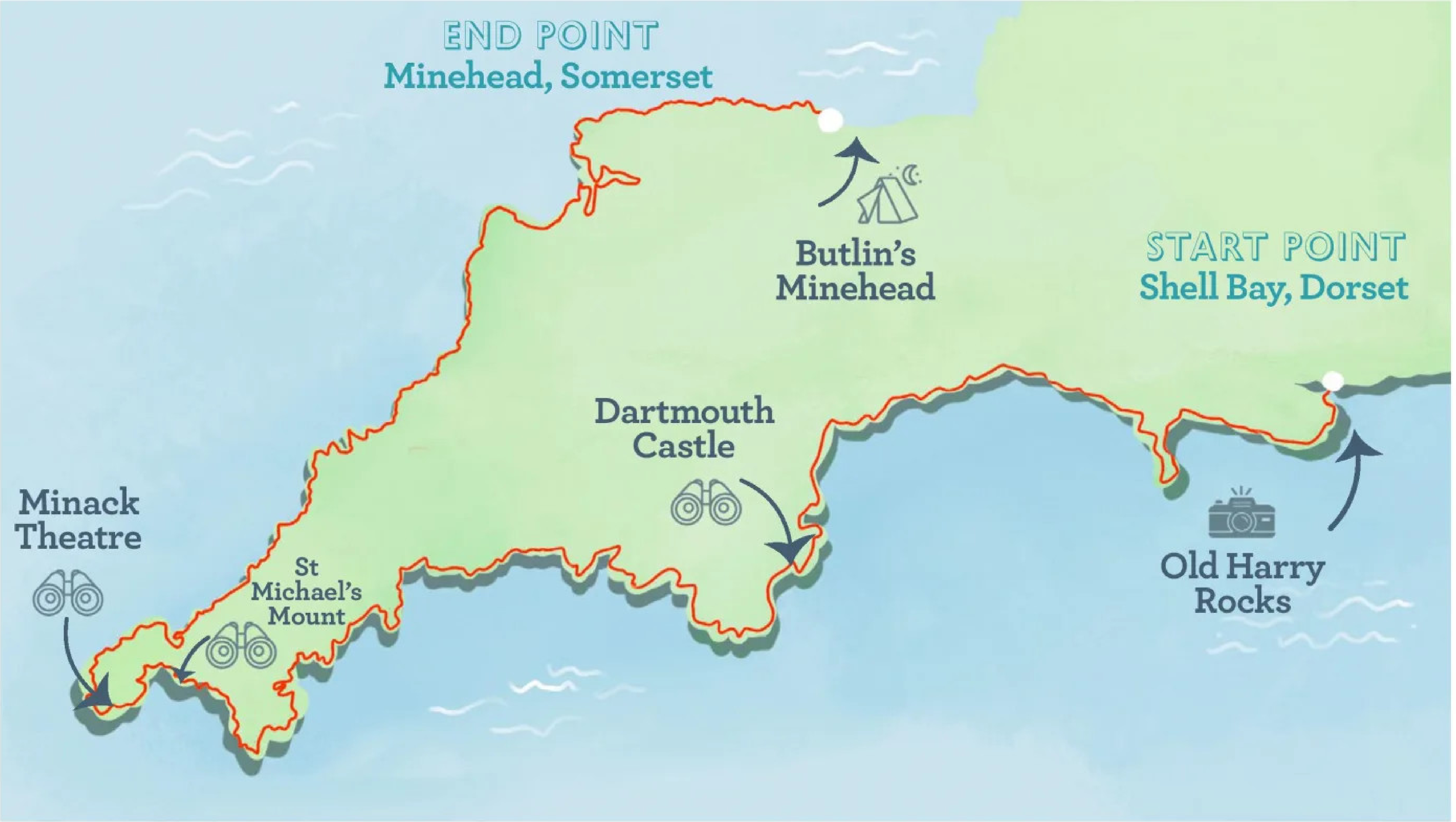
If you're keen to get started, pack up your poles and catch the Sandbanks Ferry from the town of Poole to the tip of Shell Bay – you'll find a waymarker that marks the start of the route here. Opt to relax on the sand with a picnic before you set off, or continue through the pretty village of Studland towards Old Harry Rocks – chalk stacks steeped in local tales of smuggling.

At Old Harry, the Path turns west. It's here you'll come across some of the Path's star attractions: Lulworth Cove and the neighbouring Durdle Door. This shell-shaped bay and limestone arch, respectively, were formed by sea erosion in the prehistoric period. If you think geology rocks, you'll find plenty of information boards en route that tell you all about the fascinating Jurassic Coast.

Past the Isle of Portland, the chalk gives way to sandstone, which looks especially pretty bathed in the golden light of sunset. The route runs parallel to Chesil Beach, a 29-kilometre (18-mile) stretch of shingle, but it's a unique detour if you'd like to see it. Next, the Path climbs up to beautiful Golden Cap – at 191 metres (627 feet) it's the highest point on the South Coast.

Crossing into Devon, the scenery changes once again, to the county's iconic, crumbly red soil. Even the sand is red, giving the sea a tinge of terracotta. Take a little ferry across the sweeping mouth of the River Exe to Dawlish, a popular holiday resort. It's a good place to recuperate, and you can choose from luxury seaside hotels, budget caravan parks and campsites.

Soon after Dawlish, the arid red soil bursts into life, transforming into the pretty woodlands of South Devon. More picturesque, fun-packed seaside adventures await in Torquay. Grab an ice cream and get into the holiday mood at the fairground, or go undercover and explore the town's Agatha Christie connection. Further south and deeper into the wooded valleys is Dartmouth, a historic port filled with castles,



colourful streets and churches. Try a cream tea here – but make sure you put the clotted cream on your scone first, as this is the Devonian way.

In Plymouth, a lively and modern town, you'll traverse the Tamar into Cornwall. If you fancy another cream tea, it's jam first here – no ifs or buts. Cornwall is England's Wild West, the land of Poldark and pirates. The Path takes you to countless secluded coves, which once would have been shrouded in secrecy, the hideouts of bootleggers and criminals. For a decidedly less wild experience, it's worth diverting inland to the Eden Project, a famous biome complex in a typically Cornish quarry containing a steamy jungle, Mediterranean landscape and thrilling zip line.

Cornwall points out into the open ocean, and possesses mainland Britain's most southerly and westerly points. The former you'll find at the Lizard, a heathy headland that harbours a variety of unusual flora and fauna. Go west, passing turquoise seas and ancient monastic islands, to Land's End – the clue is in the name. The seas here are rough, as Britain is pummelled by the full force of the Atlantic. Many a ship has been wrecked off these dark cliffs, but the lighthouse has been a lifesaver for centuries.

The Path turns back east at this point, and you'll pass through the safe havens and fishing villages that make up the sleepy North Cornwall coast, including Portreath and Port Isaac. Towards the end of the Cornish coast you'll find Tintagel, the ruined castle said to be the place that mythical King Arthur was conceived. Whether it's true or not, the pull of the past is strong here, as a city built by the Britannic Dumnonii tribe.

Penultimately, the Path goes through North Devon, which can be a challenging area, as there is a fair amount of uphill and downhill climbing. Should you need a rest, splay out on the vast sandy beaches of Bude, or treat yourself to a pint of local ale. At Hartland Point (99 metres (325 feet)) you'll get spectacular views of the Isle of Lundy, out in the Bristol Channel. If you tire of climbing hills, enjoy a jaunt on the Victorian water-powered funicular, from Lynmouth to the hamlet of Lynton.

The home stretch in Somerset is worth savouring, as the cliffs iron out to the wooded valleys around Porlock Weir, a mist-covered, idyllic fishing village. Before setting off on the final hike to Minehead, fortify your body and mind at the Ship Inn, a gastropub set in a traditional thatched cottage. There's plenty of outdoor seating on which to enjoy your fish and chips.

The Somerset town of Minehead is where your epic journey ends (or begins, if you choose to do it the other way around). You've done enough walking, so sit down with a hot cup of tea and a slice of Somerset Cider Cake – you've earned it.

START POINT
SHELL BAY, DORSET
END POINT
MINEHEAD, SOMERSET

GETTING THERE

Bournemouth has the nearest airport if you're starting at Shell Bay. If you're setting off from Minehead, it's best to fly into Bristol instead. Trains and buses are available throughout most of the route.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Weekdays between April and October – it's a lot quieter than on weekends, and the weather won't be too cold during these months.

WHAT TO WEAR

Waterproof boots are ideal for shallow rivers and creeks, while a light raincoat will help you cope with the changeable British weather.

WHAT TO TAKE

Take a water bottle, as you can ask pubs and restaurants to refill it. An OS map is also a sensible idea.

PIT STOPS

Many parts of the Path are managed by the National Trust, which usually operates car parks, cafes, gift shops and public toilets.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Historic hotels, traditional inns, leafy campsites and friendly B&Bs abound on this route.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.southwestcoastpath.org.uk
www.nationaltrail.co.uk/en_GB/trails/south-west-coast-path
tinyurl.com/ldwaswcp

It's hard to believe Cornwall's beaches are in the UK

© Getty Images/ Free Vector Maps | Words: Alice Barnes-Brown

ICELAND

LAUGAVEGUR

A true song of ice and fire, this trail boasts some of the world's most diverse scenery

55km/34mi

4 days

Moderate

Point to Point

1,700m/5,580ft

START POINT
LANDMANNALAUGAR

END POINT
THÓRSMÖRK

GETTING THERE

Tour operators offer single and return bus journeys between Reykjavík and both Landmannalaugar and Thórsmörk.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Weather is temperamental, and it is highly recommended to only visit between the end of June and end of August, when huts are open.

WHAT TO WEAR

Good-quality waterproof and windproof jacket, trousers, hat, scarf and gloves. Wear layers that you can easily remove during the day.

WHAT TO TAKE

Sleeping bag and sleeping pad, food, water-treatment tablets, and towel and swimming costume for the hot spring!

PIT STOPS

Álftavatn and Thórsmörk huts serve hot meals, have potable running water, toilets, showers and hut wardens who sell basic supplies.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

There are six huts: Landmannalaugar, Hrafntinnusker, Álftavatn, Hvanngil, Emstrur (Botnar) and Thórsmörk. Booking is required.

USEFUL WEBSITES

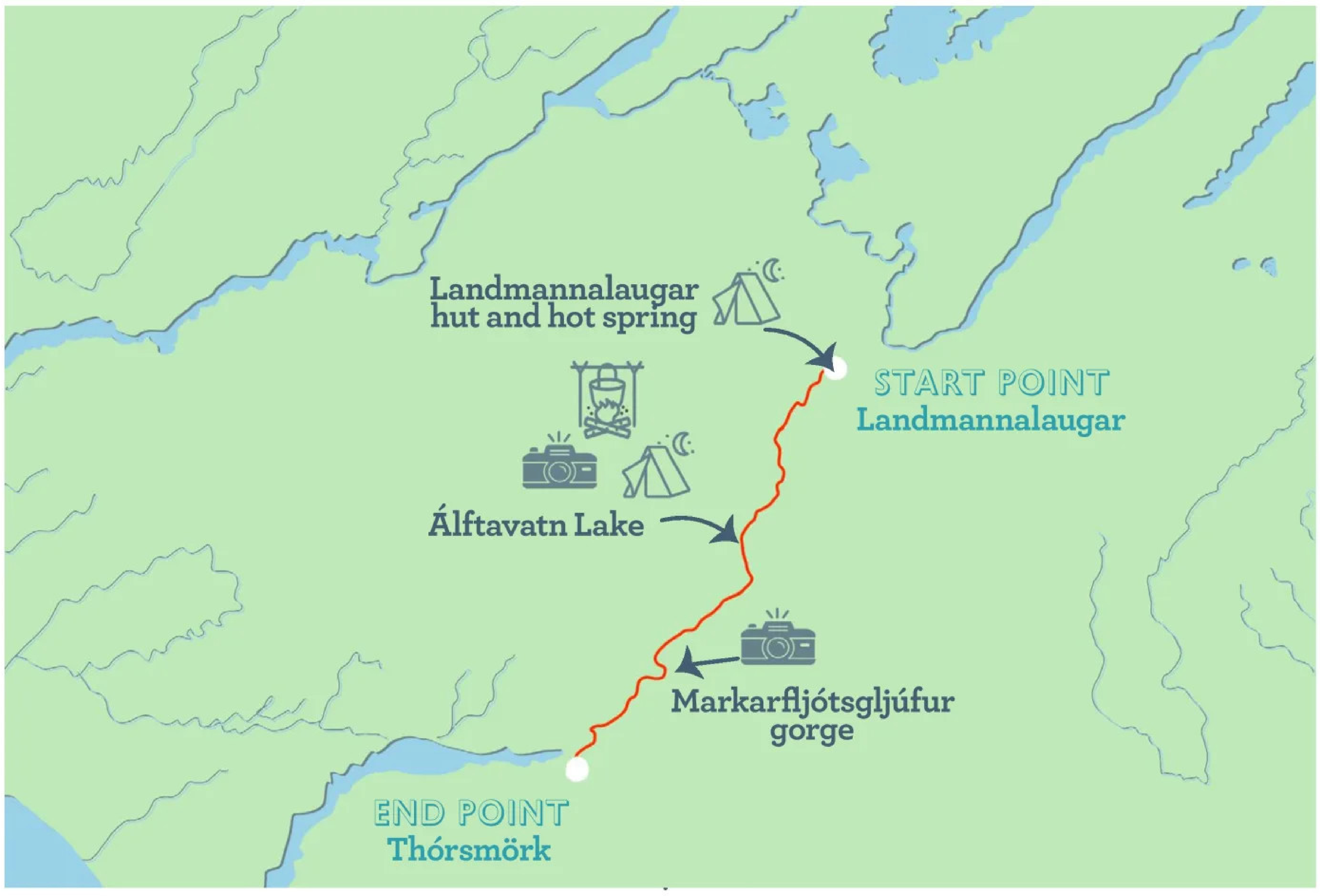
south.is/en
fi.is/en/hiking-trails/trails/laugavegur
anothericeland.com/guides/landmannalaugar-thorsmork

Iceland's most popular hiking trail, the Laugavegur trail, is home to some of the most unique and extraordinary landscapes on the planet. These vistas will take your breath away with the jaw-dropping jagged mountains and gorgeous geothermal black sands among a backdrop of grand, serene glaciers. Though wildlife is sparse in this area, and weather is unpredictable, there is truly nowhere else like Laugavegur.

Located in the Icelandic Highlands, the trail has huts where you can stay alongside 50 to 70 other guests; most people will book five huts in advance – one for each night of the journey. The rocky terrain makes the environment almost impossible for putting tent pegs down, and as weather is temperamental with little warning of strong winds and heavy rain, the huts are recommended for hikers of all levels.

The trail starts at Landmannalaugar, where you can choose to relax at a bubbling thermal hot spring, underneath a wall of lava where the almost alien-looking Eldhraun lava field stops, before starting your adventure.

Landmannalaugar is situated within the heart of the Fjallabak Nature Reserve, and it'd be remiss to not mention the stunning red-and-yellow streaked mountains that surround the area. From there, you can head through the jagged Laugahraun lava field, over the captivating striped rhyolite mountains along gradually uphill and steep parts towards the Hrafntinnusker hut, which is around 12 kilometres (7.5 miles) south-west of Landmannalaugar.



Above: Some of the stunning jagged mountains along the Icelandic Highlands

Stay here for the night, and wake up fresh before heading out among the fields of obsidian that give Hrafntinnusker its name (which literally translates as 'obsidian skerry'). Here, you'll venture through the Reykjafell mountains before taking in a bird's-eye view of Álftavatn Lake from the top of Jokultungur pass, which is known locally as 'Swan Lake' thanks to a folklore tale from the 18th century.

As you descend to the lake, you'll find Álftavatn hut, which has incredible 360-degree views of the surrounding mountains. Another accomodation option for this leg of the hike is Hvanngil hut, which can be found just an hour or so away from Álftavatn down through the Hvanngil gully. All huts require booking in advance, so when planning your trip you should consider which rest stop works best for you.

On your third day, you will need to cross (or carefully wade through) several rivers, including Bláfjallakvísl and the glacial Innri-Emstruá, which was formed from the Mýrdalsjökull glacier. Next you'll arrive at the volcanic black sands of Mælifellssandur and the first real green flurry of vegetation at Stórasúla. By this point you'll have travelled 15 kilometers (9.3 miles), and it's not too far from the third hut at Botnar in Emstrur. Here you can take in the breathtaking views of the Markarfljótsgljúfur gorge, which was formed from a historic eruption of the Katla volcano some 2,000 years ago.

After resting at the hut, it's time for the final stretch of the journey towards Thórsmörk, where you'll encounter the black sand desert of Emstrur and the icy freshness as you wade through the River Thronga before arriving at your last hut. Thórsmörk lies in a green valley at the foot of the infamous Eyjafjallajökull volcano.

The journey doesn't have to stop here though. If you have it in you for another two days of hiking, it's well recommended to carry on to the more challenging Fimmvörduháls trail, where you can see as many as 20 stunning waterfalls and several colossal canyons. If you don't fancy that, you can still take part in day hikes around Thórsmörk by venturing into valleys of birch forests instead, which will make a welcome change from the geothermal sands and striped mountains that have been so prominent in the trail so far. No matter where you end your hike, or how the weather ends up, you'll find the Laugavegur trail utterly exceptional.

© Getty Images/ Free Vector Maps | Words: Carrie Mok

While camping is permitted in designated areas, it is recommended that hikers stay in the dedicated huts along the route

The site that pilgrims and walkers dream of – Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, Galicia, Spain – at sunrise

SPAIN/FRANCE

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

A path well trodden for centuries, and many hikers claim it changed their lives forever

860km/534mi

30-35 days

Difficult

Point to Point

20,227m/66,362ft

The Camino de Santiago is not just one route – it's actually a network of pilgrimage routes through Europe created in the Middle Ages by pilgrims who wanted to leave from their doorsteps to make the journey on foot to Santiago de Compostela, a town in Galicia in north-western Spain. Here, we're concentrating on the Camino Francés, which covers around 770 kilometres (478 miles) in and of itself. It starts in the ancient Pyrenean town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, climbs the Pyrenees, wends its way through hilly woodland paths and villages, crosses the expansive flat plains of the Meseta and then on through a couple of beautiful cities to Montes de León and into the rural peace of Galicia. Our route also bolts on the 90-kilometre (56-mile) Finisterre Way after Santiago, and ends at the coast at Finisterre, or the End of the World as it was known in Roman times. Despite its name, the majority of Camino Francés is in northern Spain – only the very first section is in France.

With religious roots, the Way is now largely trod by walkers. Even without its directly religious purpose, the huge challenge is often a transformative and spiritual event in people's lives. Some do it for fitness, some do it to mark a milestone,

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

It's not always glorious sunshine! These poncho-clad pilgrims are on the Camino de Santiago between Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and Roncesvalles

START POINT
SAINT-JEAN-PIED-DE-PORT

END POINT
FINISTERRE

GETTING THERE

The closest airport to the start point is Biarritz, and then it's about 55km (34mi) to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port (SJPdP). Take a train, bus or transfer taxi from the airport. Many fly to Pamplona in Spain and then transfer to SJPdP from there.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

May to June and then September and October are the best months to embark. Unsurprisingly, July and August can get very hot.

WHAT TO WEAR

Hiking shoes and/or hiking sandals, rain poncho or waterproof shell, gaiters, beanie, sunglasses.

WHAT TO TAKE

Head torch, pen knife, first aid kit, poles.

PIT STOPS

There are plenty of bars, cafés, restaurants and shops, so you'll never be far from food, water or toilets. People are very friendly to 'pilgrims', so you'll get a warm welcome wherever you go.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

A fantastic range of options to suit all budgets, from campsites and hostels (albergues) to pensions and hotels.

USEFUL WEBSITES

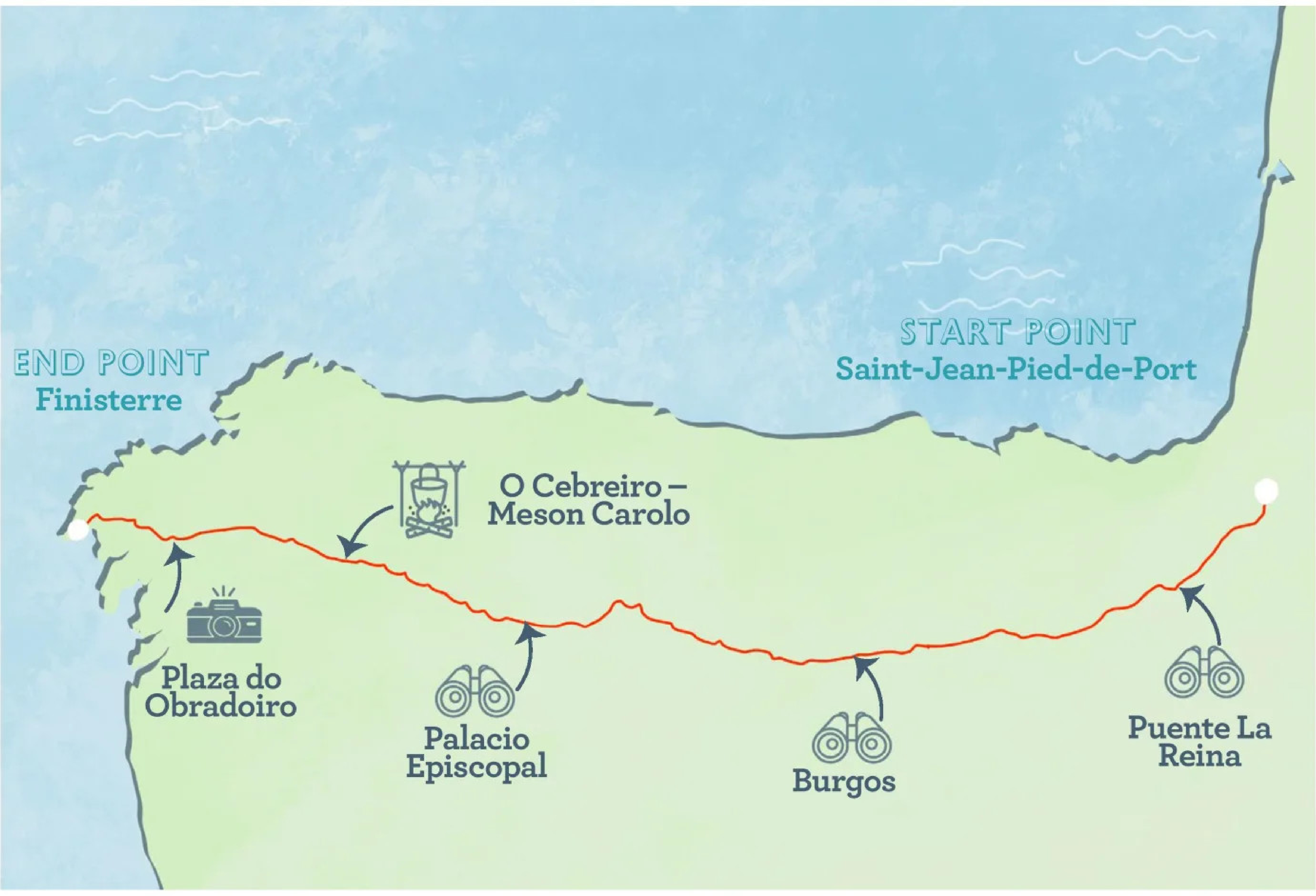
oficinadelperegrino.com/en
santiago-compostela.net
www.caminodesantiago.me

and some do it to escape the rigours of day-to-day life. What's consistent is that most hikers who complete the month-long hike more often than not have it down as the best thing they've ever done in their lives – and, let's face it, that number of 'peregrinos' (or pilgrims) can't be wrong, can they?

The route is long and difficult to cover in detail here, but we'll pluck some highlights from its itinerary. First, we should talk about the friendliness of this long-distance route. Pilgrims trek in groups or alone but either way the sense of camaraderie is ever present. You'll never pass another walker (unless they're dead-beat exhausted) who doesn't tip their hat, give you a grin or call "Buen Camino!" to you – loosely translated as "Have a good time on the Camino!" and a great conversation starter. If you choose to stay overnight in the albergues (hostels) en route that are run by churches or villages that you pass through, you'll meet an endless stream of walkers going through the same experiences as you.

You'll come across a lot of different terrain, from the Pyrenees mountains to the hills of Navarra, the vineyards of La Rioja to the Castilian plateau, and then the green hills approaching Santiago. As an ancient pilgrimage route that has been used for centuries by the devoutly religious, you won't be surprised to find there are numerous churches, cathedrals, convents and monasteries en route, some of which are still in use, and some might be the location for your overnight hostel stop! And of course, it being Spain, you'll dine like royalty on this trek. Ration packs and freeze-dried food need not take up space in your backpack here, because you can pick up cheap and delicious food like hearty soups and stews, fish and bakery items all along the way. The Spanish are a nation of sweet-tooths and one of the many indulgences you can stuff in your pocket to fuel your heavy legs is the Tarta de Santiago… or maybe leave that to celebrate at the finish point!

If you stick your pin in the Camino Francés route, you're sure to stumble upon a great Spanish hamlet or village with something to recommend it. A 35-day itinerary would have you walking 25 kilometres (15 miles) per day, and would enable you to stop in most of the best places along the route, including the cities of Pamplona, Logroño and León, and also give you time to savour the small-town delights of places such as Puente La Reina, Estella, Astorga and O Cebreiro.



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FRANCE

GR20

Mountainous, dry and very challenging underfoot – meet Europe's toughest trail

180km/112mi **15-16 days** **Difficult** **Point to Point** **12,000m/39,370ft**

The GR20 hike – arguably the most iconic, and allegedly the toughest, long-distance trail in Europe – is around 70 years old, having first been traced in the 1950s. The route was formalised in 1972, to much scepticism from Corsicans, but its popularity has grown and grown over the decades. Today, it is regarded as one of the world's best trails.

GR stands for Grande Randonnée, 'great hike' in French, and the GR is a network of walking routes criss-crossing Europe, mostly in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. GR20 is considered to be the most difficult of all the GR routes, but it's certainly a beautiful one, winding its way through the Regional Natural Park of Corsica by crossing the island's mountainous spine from north to south.

This isn't the last time we'll mention how tough the hike is, but you only have to consider the distance – 180 kilometres (112 miles) – and the total elevation gain – around a dizzying 12,000 metres (39,370 feet) – and the penny will begin to drop. Having said that, if you're perfectly fit and confident about walking in rugged mountain terrain, there's no reason why you shouldn't give it a go. Mountain huts are dotted along the route for overnight stops, and the trail is clearly marked with splashes of red and white paint, so a self-guided challenge is certainly achievable.

The trail is geographically split into two parts, and some hikers choose to do each on separate trips. The northern part starts in Calenzana and stops in Vizzavona; the southern part starts in Vizzavona and ends in Conca. The latter covers far easier terrain, so

On the GR20 hike, you'll be treated to far-reaching views across the Corsican mountains

The view over Capitellu and Melu lakes as seen from the trail

Look out for the splashes of red and white paint, marking the way

you'll find fewer chains and ladders to tackle, and less scrambling is required than in the northern part.

If you're attempting the full length in one go – and we're assuming you are – another key decision you'll need to make is where to start and end, in other words whether to travel southwards or northwards. The northern section is harder-going on the legs and feet, so you might prefer to get the tough stuff out of the way first. Or you might decide to warm up on the southern stretch before a last big effort in the north. Bear in mind that north to south is the 'original' direction and therefore more popular. Some veteran GR20 hikers advise going south to north instead, which helps to avoid the crowds and also puts the sun on your back for most of the hike, making visibility and navigation a bit easier.

Right, so you've had a word with your quadriceps and hamstrings and checked in with your mental-strength barometer and you've decided to tackle the GR20. The good news is that there are plenty of refuges (huts run by the park) or bergeries (privately owned huts) on the route for overnight stops. It's advisable in high season to pack a pop-up tent too, as the mountain huts can get busy and a tent is a good backup. You can also choose to go off route to nearby villages for some more comfortable accommodation options, because the refuges are basic – often a mattress on the floor of an open-plan room; it might feel a bit like playing sleeping lions with people you've never met before! The refuges offer food and drinking water in high season (June to September), and provide basic sanitation too. For the other months of the year, they stay open for safety but are unmanned. If you need to stock up on supplies, there are a few places along the route where dipping into a nearby village below would make sense, notably Calasima, Soccia and Vizzavona.

A closer look at the stats of the 15 stages of the hike puts its difficulty in fine focus. The ascents are tough, and even daily distances that look small on paper take a phenomenally long time to complete,

> "VETERAN HIKERS SUGGEST TRAVELLING SOUTH TO NORTH TO AVOID THE CROWDS"

START POINT
CALENZANA

END POINT
CONCA

GETTING THERE

The start point in the northwest of Corsica is near Calvi, which is easily accessible by plane or ferry (and then a bus to Calenzana). Or you can take the ferry to Bastia and get a bus from there.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

June and September are the best when you consider footfall, the opening season for refuges, and temperatures.

WHAT TO WEAR

Good-quality boots and clothing that covers you up and protects you from the sun.

WHAT TO TAKE

A map, poles and a sturdy backpack – places to stock up are sporadic so take the most you can carry. Water purification tablets are a good call.

PIT STOPS

Huts are the only pit stops on the route itself, but if you venture off there are some villages with more extensive facilities. Check your map.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Refuges along the route are very basic. They usually house 25 to 30 people but it's a good idea to pack a tent in case they're full. Camping is permitted near refuges but not on the route.

USEFUL WEBSITES

gr20.co.uk
le-gr20.fr/en
corsica.forhikers.com/gr20

© Getty Images\ Free Vector Maps | Words: Rachel Ifans

The village of Vizzavona is a good place to stock up on supplies for the final part of the trail

due to the ups and downs (mostly ups in the northern section) and the challenging terrain. To put things into perspective, let's take a look at the first day of the route: from Calenzana to Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu it's a ten-kilometre (6.2-mile) hike, with an ascent of 1,295 metres (4,250 feet) and a descent of 275 metres (900 feet), taking about six or seven hours. So don't expect a gentle start to ease yourself into the trip!

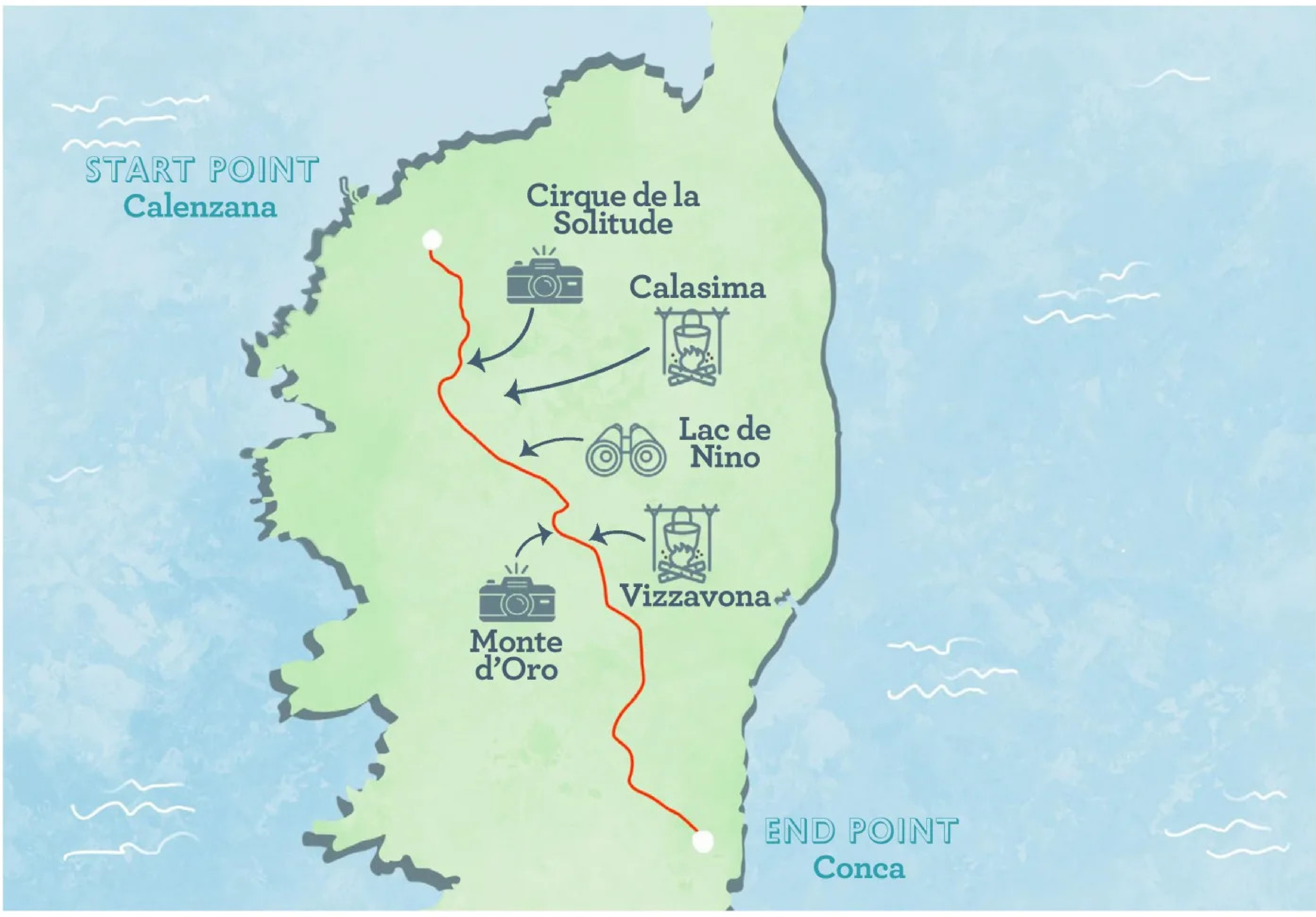
Although the hike is breathtaking, and comes with the greatest sense of achievement, it's essential to do detailed research beforehand so that you're not surprised by the reality when you get there. If you've ever heard of the phrase 'Type 1 fun', it definitely applies to the GR20 long-distance trail. While 'Type 2 fun' feels good while you're doing it, Type 1 feels gruelling when you're doing it, but seems like fun as soon as you stop and makes you want to do it all over again.

The helpful red-and-white waymarkers can be found on almost anything that doesn't move (including rocks, boulders and tree trunks, while feeder paths are marked by a single colour only. You'll need a really good map, as it's easy to mistake a feeder path for the main route in certain stretches.

GR20 is really difficult, but it's not one of the most iconic hikes in Europe for its toughness alone, although Corsicans often claim that's its raison d'être. We disagree and think the wonderful flora and fauna on the route, as well as the incredible views and remote refuges, all combine to make the hike so special. Corsica is such a haven from the ravages of modern life, and its wildlife is abundant and unspoilt.

A list of native animals (with names that wouldn't be out of place in a Harry Potter book) should be on your list to spot during the hike: everything from the Corsican nuthatch and the Tyrrhenian wall lizard to Herman's tortoise and fire salamanders. You'll also see wild boar, foxes, the Corsican 'mouflon' (wild sheep), of course, and a great range of feathered friends, from yellow-beaked mountain chuffs to eagles, falcons and kites, and the wonderfully named bearded vulture, the lammergeier.

As for the local flora, it was perhaps best summarised by Guy de Maupassant, the celebrated 19th-century French writer, who described the Corsican landscape thus: "Enormous pine trees created a groaning canopy above our heads that gave out a sad and constant lament, whilst both to the left



A SHORT HOP TO PORTO VECCHIO

After you've made the Herculean effort to conquer GR20, you'll want somewhere to cool off and relax for a couple of days before heading home.

The south of Corsica is a lovely holiday destination, with glistening blue waters, sandy beaches and old fortified towns. Not far from the end point of the GR20 in Conca is Porto Vecchio, a port city built around a natural harbour. It has an unspoilt charm that other Mediterranean resorts can lack.

The old town is a mass of streets and alleyways, piazzas and market stalls. Eagle-eyed architecture fans will see evidence of Roman rule in the buildings, and shouldn't miss the excellent 16th-century citadel. From the city, you can take short trips further afield to find idyllic beaches and inland forests to explore as you coax your body back to life.

Treat yourself with a restorative stay in Porto Vecchio after the GR20 is done and dusted

A typical late-afternoon panorama on GR20

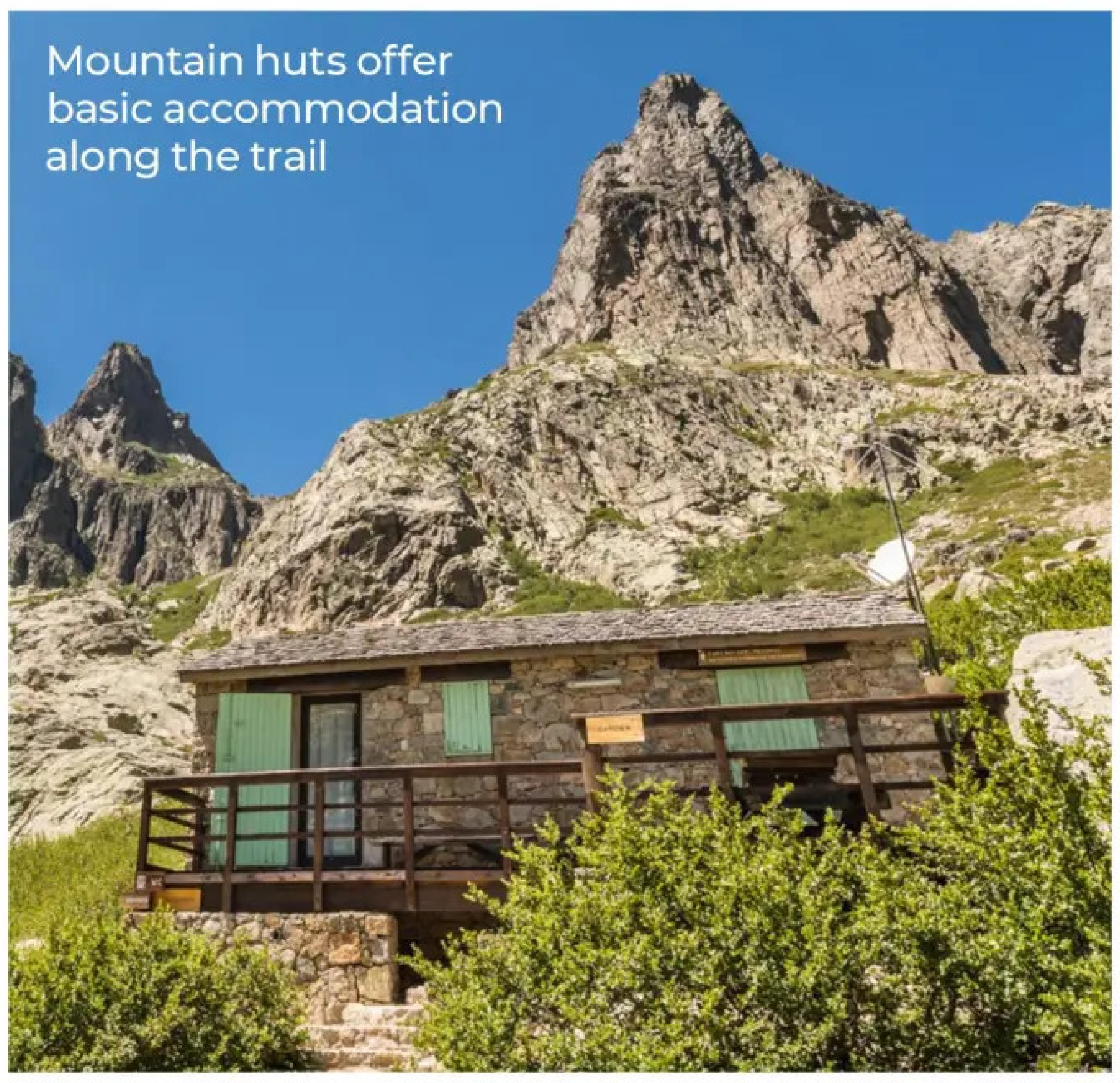
Discover tumbling waterfalls along the route, where your tired feet will welcome a dip in the serene rock pools below

> “THE LOCAL FLORA GIVES THE AREA ITS DELIGHTFUL AROMA”

and to the right, their straight and slender trunks formed a sort of army of organ pipes that seemed to make monotonous music of wind amongst the pines.”

It’s not all forests, though, and of course the vegetation changes with altitude, moving from Mediterranean to mountainous and then, above 2,000 metres, (6,560 feet) the alpine zone. You’ll see it in the trees, which change from olive and cork oak to beech then pine as you climb. You’ll also pass through Corsican maquis scrubland, where a blanket of evergreen shrubs protect a variety of aromatic flowers and herbs nestled beneath, contributing to the area’s delightful and unforgettable fragrance.

The GR20 deserves its reputation as a difficult hike, but if you do your research and go prepared, you’ll be rewarded with a truly unique and fulfilling experience.



Mountain huts offer basic accommodation along the trail

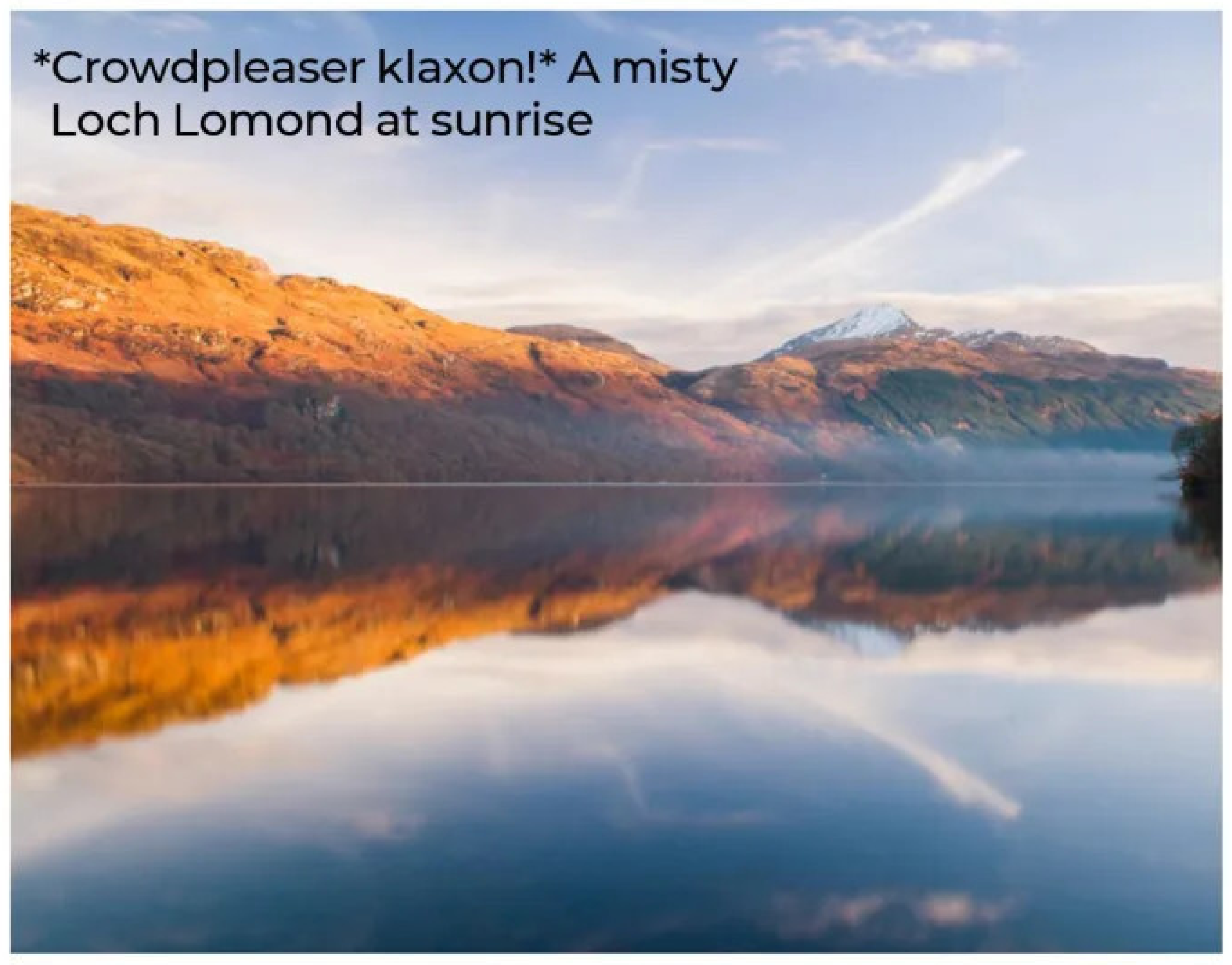
© Getty Images

SCOTLAND

WEST HIGHLAND WAY

Hike from Milngavie to Fort William via Loch Lomond and the wilderness

154km/96mi | 6-8 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 3,155m/10,351ft

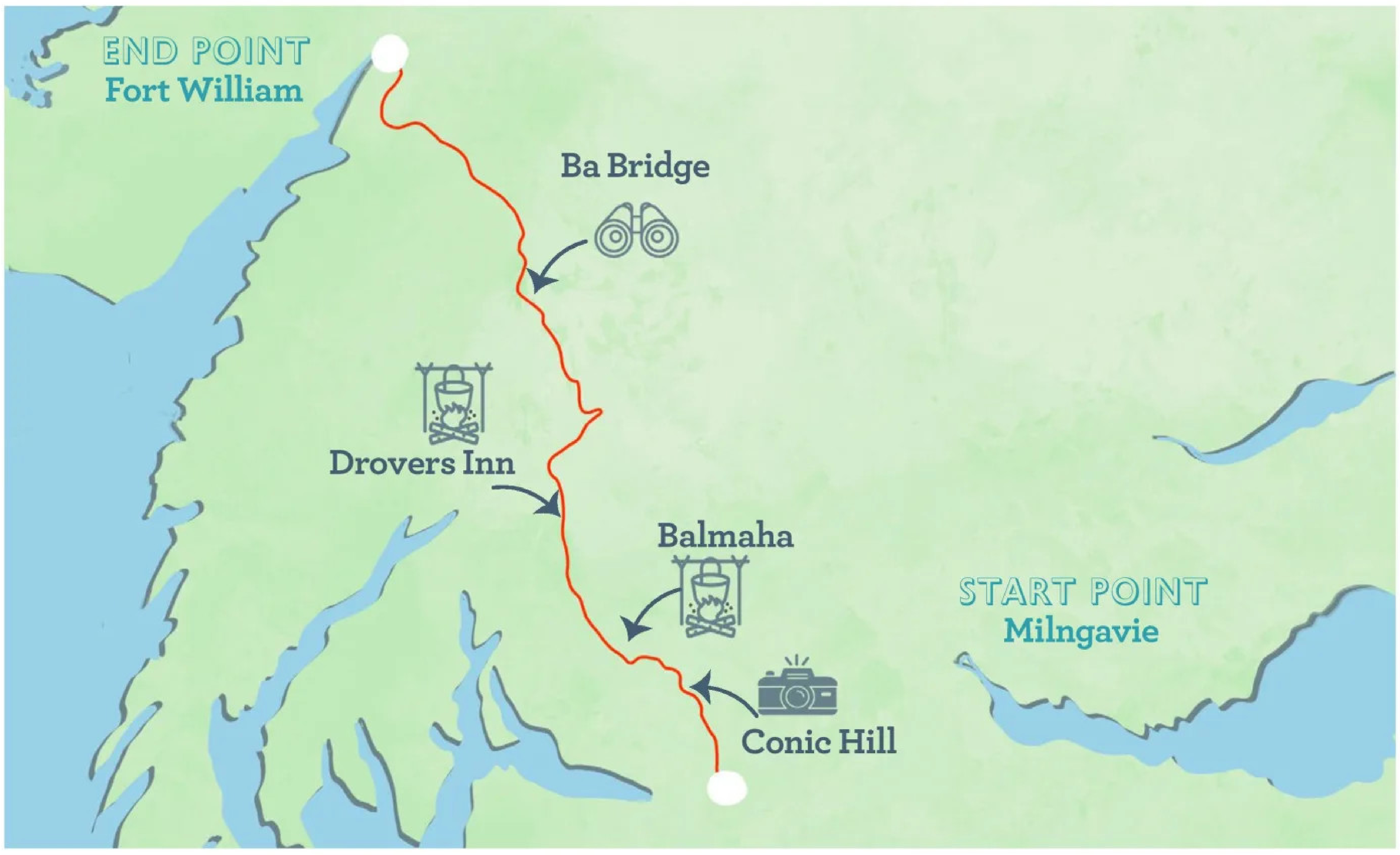

Crowdpleaser klaxon! A misty Loch Lomond at sunrise

The West Highland Way (WHW) is usually undertaken from south to north, so that means starting the hike not far from Glasgow, in a small place called Milngavie, and ending in Fort William. This direction is advised because by getting the easier – flatter! – miles under your belt at the start, you'll be warmed up for the highs and lows later.

The route takes you through unforgettable landscapes, from the majesty of Loch Lomond National Park, to pasture land, snow-capped mountains in the distance and on to barren wildernesses forests intercut by streams.

The Way, which officially starts at an obelisk on Douglas Street in Milngavie, is well signposted and maintained. It doesn't take long for the gluts of hikers to disperse, and you'll soon find yourself alone and getting a taste of the diverse landscapes to come: check out the smaller lochs and follow the river path on this first stretch to Drymen, keeping your eyes peeled for bluebells and butterflies (if in season), chiffchaffs and even kestrels.

After Drymen, a path takes you up to the top of Conic Hill, from where you'll drink in the views of Loch Lomond. Laid out before you is the huge stretch of water that will guide your walk for the next 35 kilometres (22 miles). Look out for buzzards and ravens, and notice the string of islands



The remote Lagangarbh Hut in front of Buachaille Etive Mor on a summer's afternoon

in the loch that mark the line between the lowlands and highlands of Scotland. The path drops down to Balmaha before snaking through ancient woodland along the shores of the loch. Many of the UK's dwindling red squirrel population live in Scotland, so the woodlands here are a great place to try to spot them.

Expect a step change as you near the top of the loch. It's more remote and you'll have to crank up the effort to match the terrain as you get your first sense of being in the wilderness proper. At the tip of Lomond, the waters are more than 182 metres (600 feet) deep, and at Inversnaid the Way crosses a fantastic waterfall. The wildlife changes too; expect to see birds of prey taking their chances with fish in the loch, and look out for mountain goats, roe deer in the woods and red deer grazing the peaks.

Touristy it may be, but it's almost a crime to hike the WHW without a stop at the centuries-old Drovers Inn. You'll likely enjoy a whisky and a roaring fire, but beware the unusual guests! Drovers is allegedly one of the most haunted places in Britain, so be sure to indulge in some spectre-storytelling before you head on up the path, no doubt looking back over your shoulder as you do!

Also take the time to look up and admire the mountains above you as you follow the River Falloch past the halfway point in Crianlarich (this is slightly off the route for a stop) and then further north to Tyndrum.

After Tyndrum, the facilities become more sporadic; it's 45 kilometres (28 miles) to Kinlochleven and the next shops, so make sure your supplies are well stocked for this section of the route, a tranche that tracks the floor of the glen and skirts mountains such as Beinn Odhar and Beinn Dorain. You'll see the West Highland Railway line swoop off to the right, but you stay straight towards Rannoch Moor. One of the last proper wildernesses in Europe, the exposed moor is often battered by the elements, so you need to make sure you're equipped to deal with all it throws at you. Ba Bridge marks halfway across the moor, and the ruins of a cottage just beyond is a good place to eat your lunch and shelter from the wind. This area is a great place to spot many of the animals and birds previously mentioned, especially the red deer and birds of prey.

Next, hikers come up close and personal with one of Scotland's famous munros (a mountain with a height of more than 900 metres (3,000 feet)). It's called Buachaille Etive Mor, which translates to 'The Great Herdsman of Etive'. On the left you'll see Glen Etive, which you might recognise from an iconic scene in the James Bond *Skyfall* movie when Bond and M stand looking out at the view, and on the right, historic Glen Coe, the site of the massacre of Clan MacDonald in 1692.

The excitement doesn't end there. Turn right up the Devil's Staircase – aptly named as this ascent takes you to the highest point of the Way but rewards you with unforgettable views at the top. Take time to try to spot some famous grouse in the heather while you descend gently to Kinlochleven. Liquid refreshment will be most welcome.

After a steep climb back out, you're on the last leg of the hike, and only tree plantations and a view of Ben Nevis separate you from your bronze statue'd destination in Gordon Square in Fort William.

START POINT
MILNGAVIE

END POINT
FORT WILLIAM

GETTING THERE

From Glasgow, take the train or bus to Milngavie (you can also get the train back from Fort William at the end). You can drive, of course, but there is no official car park at the start – try local B&B and hotel car parks, or there is free parking in front of the railway station.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Avoid the depths of winter, and you might want to steer clear of midge season (late May to August), but other than that, take your pick!

WHAT TO WEAR

Sturdy walking boots and comfy clothes. Breathable clothes are best, and pack layers and waterproofs for all eventualities.

WHAT TO TAKE

Snacks and water are always advisable. And, depending on the weather, sunscreen and hats are essential.

PIT STOPS

There are plenty of places to stay and eat on the route.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

It's advisable to book ahead, as it's a very popular hiking route all year round.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.westhighlandway.org
www.walkhighlands.co.uk
www.hostellingscotland.org.uk

© Getty Images | Words: Rachel Ifans

SWEDEN

KUNGSLEDEN

The king of Sweden's trails, spanning five national parks of vast, Arctic wilderness

440km/273mi
1 month
Moderate
Point to Point
8,920m/29,265ft

The Kungsleden (King's Trail) begins in the mountain village of Abisko, home to off-piste skiing and the Aurora Borealis Sky Station. From here, the trail heads south through a canopy of birch and the rolling moorlands of Abisko National Park, with limestone cliff faces and views of the Abiskojokk canyon. At Lake Abiskojaure, hikers can take the plunge – its sandy, beach-like shores are perfect for swimming, with spectacular views of Mount Giron to the east.

After crossing the pristine lake by boat taxi, the King's Trail cuts through Arctic tundra, surrounded by majestic mountains and glaciers. The sound of Sweden's rich birdlife clings to the cool air, and a rocky climb rises to the trail's highest point, the mountain-pass of Tjäktjapasset. Reaching 1,150 metres (3,773 feet), it boasts one of the trail's most stunning and iconic views – a deep, luscious valley with a glistening blue river carving through its centre.

The trail from Sälka to Singi is arguably the most awe-inspiring – it's surrounded by towering, snow-capped peaks, sharp mountain walls and vast glacial tills, and the Drakryggen mountain looms in the distance. Hikers brace against the rising winds towards Singi Mountain Station, passing nomadic settlements of the indigenous Sami people (who herd reindeer and live off the land), traversing rolling heather tundra towards the Sanjartjåkka mountain peak. At Lake Teusajaure, a tropical waterfall gushes from the rockface in sheets, feeding the vast moorlands and dense birch forests of Stora Sjöfallet National Park below.

START POINT
ABISKO

END POINT
HEMAVAN

GETTING THERE

Kiruna is north Sweden's main airport, and there are frequent trains stopping in Abisko on their way to Narvik in Norway.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Hiking season lasts from mid-June to mid-September. Early September offers the best chance of seeing the Northern Lights.

WHAT TO WEAR

Clothing for all seasons, especially wet-weather gear. Sunglasses and a peaked cap to deal with low-angled sun are recommended.

WHAT TO TAKE

Waterproof camping equipment, cooking set, provisions, GPS and emergency beacon. Don't expect much of a mobile/cell phone signal!

PIT STOPS

Shops, restaurants and shower blocks are available at many mountain cabins along the route, but they can be expensive and unreliable.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

The Swedish Tourist Association runs self-catering mountain huts roughly every 12–15km (7-9mi), but camping using the facilities for a much-reduced fee is the best option.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.swedishlapland.com
www.swedishtouristassociation.com
www.fjeldsofsweden.com

Kungsleden spans five national parks and seven lakes

A must for all thru-hikers is the Saltoluokta Mountain Cabin. Perfect for a rest day at the feet of the awesome Sarek mountains on Lake Langas, it offers home comforts such as hot showers, laundry facilities and cosy cabins. Log fires roar within its charming gourmet restaurant, which dishes out locally sourced, three-course meals. Ravenous diners tuck in to the catch of the day, which is often fished from the waters just beyond the dining-room window. Here, Sami tradition is very much alive. Nearby, a colourful church tipi holds weekly sermons amidst the dramatic landscape.

The King's Trail stretches 70 kilometres (43 miles) from Saltoluokta to Kvikkjokk – an exciting and remote borderland between Sarek's craggy peaks and primeval forest to the east. Along the eastern slope of Sjakso, the trail heads onto two boat rides across the lakes Kaskajaure and Kåbtajaure. After steep ascents rounding Tåresåive, a gorgeous view of the Rapa Valley unfolds, the famous Skierfe peak in the foreground.

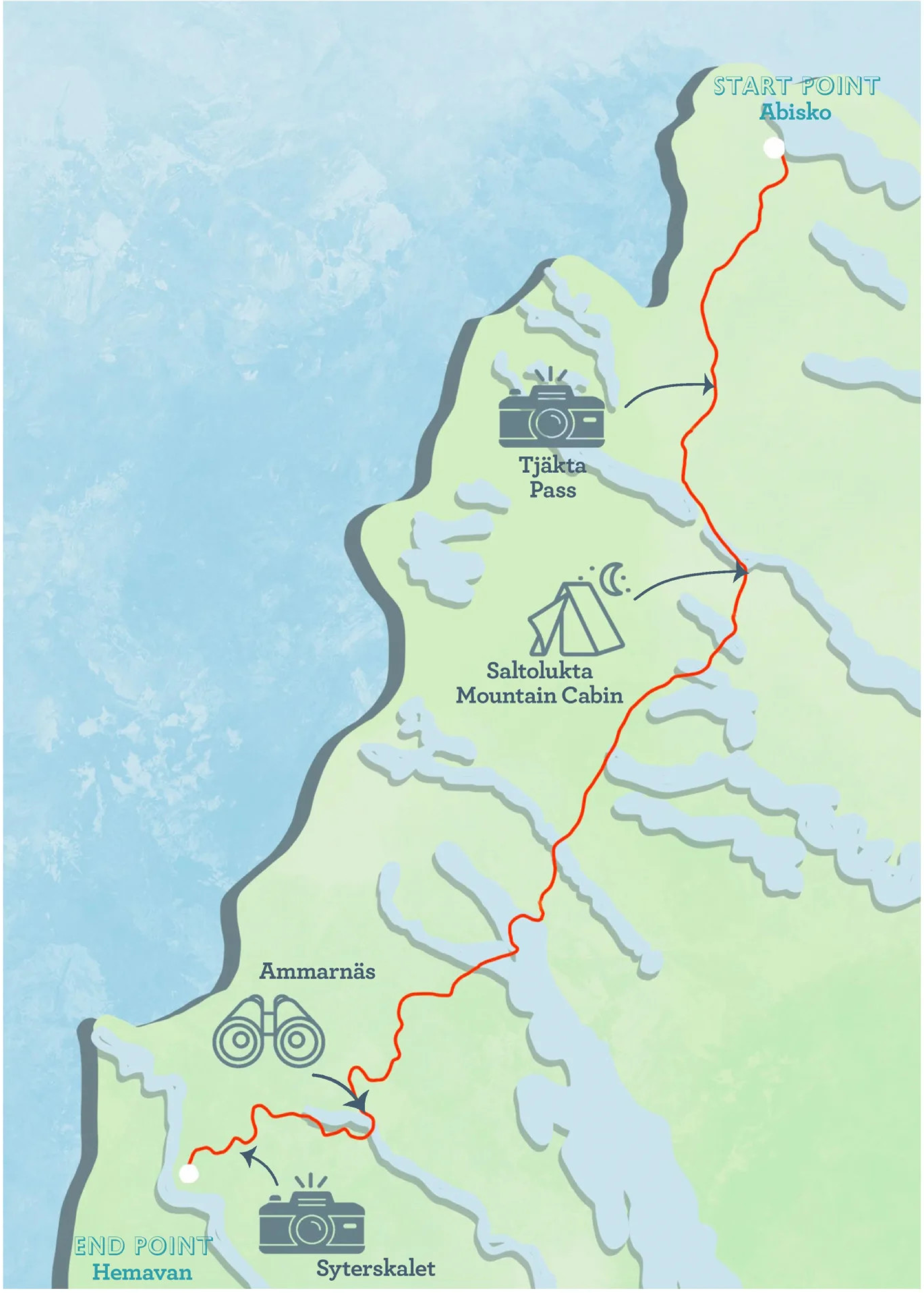
In the Sarek National Park (home to Sweden's largest alpine mountain range and nearly 100 glaciers), walkers clamber through vast forests, cross the rushing Tjåltajåkka river and pass the Tingstall Rock (once home to ancient judicial proceedings) before reaching Kvikkjokk, an alpine village seemingly at the end of the world. At the confluence of the rivers Tarra and Kamajåkkå, water-babies can rent a canoe or take a boat trip to explore the delta.

In Padjelanta National Park, the trail's most adventurous section, the hike enters bear country. With no cabins, walkers are immersed in Sweden's backcountry wilderness, relying on their own provisions and wits to see them through the long days. On hot days, some can be seen skinny-dipping in the refreshing lakes, later falling asleep to a symphony of howling wolves and crackling campfire. In the later months, the Aurora Borealis dances green and purple across the skies. An old Sami legend says the lights are caused by a magical fox bounding across the Arctic fells.

The King's Trail then traverses the mountain ridges of Vindelfjällen, home to the densest population of reindeer in Sweden, before reaching the Sami farming village of Ammarnäs – one of the best snapshots of their enduring cultural heritage and symbiotic relationship with nature, its waters rich with char, graylings and trout.

The Kungsleden climbs to Juovvatjåhkka, the highest point of the southern leg, before descending at Tärnasjön – a complex archipelago dotted with hundreds of islands, teeming with birdlife. Ramblers follow the striking, ten-kilometre-long (six-mile-long) U-shaped mountain corridor of the Syterskalet between sloping walls and onto the Södra Sytertoppens mountains to Hemavan. With the southern trailhead looming in the distance, the great Swedish adventure drawing to a close, travellers stop to bask in the tranquil beauty and dramatic plains, committing to memory one of the last untouched sanctuaries of the wild.

"WALKERS ARE IMMERSED IN SWEDEN'S BACKCOUNTRY WILDERNESS"



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ITALY

ALTA VIA1

Live the high life on this diverse trail with unique views aplenty

120km/75mi | **10-15 days** | **Moderate** | **Point to Point** | **7,955m /26,100ft**

“Edelweiss, edelweiss, every morning you greet me. Small and white, clean and bright, you look happy to meet me…” Be prepared to get this melodic Sound of Music song stuck in your head on a loop as you navigate Alta Via 1’s magnificent vistas, valleys, hills and meadows peppered with this delicate, white wildflower. Also prepare to meet alpine cows, unusual wood carvings (think bearded men and majestic birds) and views, views, views on this 120-kilometre (75-mile) hiking route in Italy’s Dolomites. Translated, ‘Alta Via Uno’ means ‘High Route One’. And, with an elevation gain approaching 8,000 metres (26,245 feet), high it is.

If you’re a fit mountain walker, the Alta Via 1 is a very manageable hike, where you can expect to walk between four and eight hours a day, depending on your goals, how many breaks you take, and how many selfies in front of the scenery you stop to take. The route is extremely diverse – a real labyrinth of trails winding through the mountains – with each day bringing unique views.

You can self-guide if you’re confident with a map (some intersections are confusing and it’s easy to take a wrong turn), but guided hikes are also on offer if you don’t want your walk to go south, as it were. Although the Alta Via 1 is, basically, a walk (albeit a long one), it does have some rough terrain with multiple ascents and descents that might be

©Getty

Staying at Lake Braies the night before you set off gives you a taste of the stunning scenery that awaits you on the hike testing at times. Typically, the mountainous sections have single-track paths that are rocky in places – sometimes with steps, but mostly just bare earth. Tracks are plentiful, and varied – from ski pistes to country lanes, gravel forest roads to rough trails over agricultural land. You'll even encounter some busy roads, like on the walk to La Stanga.

Your reserves of self-reliance and gumption will sometimes be called upon, particularly in wet weather and bad visibility (a heads up: the ninth stage across the Cime de Zita is high up and exposed to the elements). Having said that, it is possible to take variants of the main route, skipping out tougher sections and opting for smoother terrain. Equally, if you're a strong walker and want to test your limits, you can choose steeper routes with rougher terrain.

Many sections cross rocky, loose ground with steep drops to the side (don't look down!), some with metal cables as handrails and ladders to offer a little assistance. These were bolted into place during World War I to help soldiers along the route; a sombre thought to counter the stunning scenery. As well as navigating these sheer, rocky hillsides near the old battle sites from the war, you can also explore the tunnels that the troops used, such as the famous Galleria Lagazuoi.

Regardless of the route you hike, it's highly recommended that you begin your adventure at the lakeside Hotel Lago di Braies the night before you set off. Lago di Braies, also known as Pragser Wildsee, Lake Prags or Lake Braies (why have one name when you can have four?) is dazzling and will whet your appetite for the wonders you're about to see. The area is teeming with tourists during the day but, by early evening, most of the day hikers have left and you'll be left in relative peace and quiet to absorb the beauty. Be prepared for a tough initial climb of about 900 metres (2,950 feet) from here to reach the high mountains and the Alta Via 1. Rest assured, it's worth the effort.

On the route itself, there are many 'rifugios' (mountain huts), where you can rest your weary feet, shelter from a storm, tuck in to a three-course meal, hose off in a warm shower and lay your head for the night. Many are positioned in the most idyllic spots: deep inside a valley, perched high on a mountaintop, or with rolling hills as far as the eye can see as a backdrop. For an unforgettable sunrise, stay at Rifugio Lagazuoi, which offers 360-degree views of the Dolomites. You (and your aching muscles) might also enjoy its Finnish sauna, also with panoramic views.

START POINT
LAGO DI BRAIES/PRAGSER WILDSEE
END POINT
BELLUNO

GETTING THERE

You can reach Lago di Braies/Pragser Wildsee via bus. For the return trip, Belluno has both train and bus services.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

It can be hiked during July to September, when the route should be mostly free of snow.

WHAT TO WEAR

Don't forget to pack comfy clothes and an extra pair of shoes or sandals to wear inside the mountain huts in the evenings.

WHAT TO TAKE

A good map and compass, plus a torch if you plan to venture into the caves. Earplugs are a good idea, as you'll be sleeping in dorms.

PIT STOPS

There are plenty of huts and restaurants along the route where you can stop for food and drinks and use the facilities.

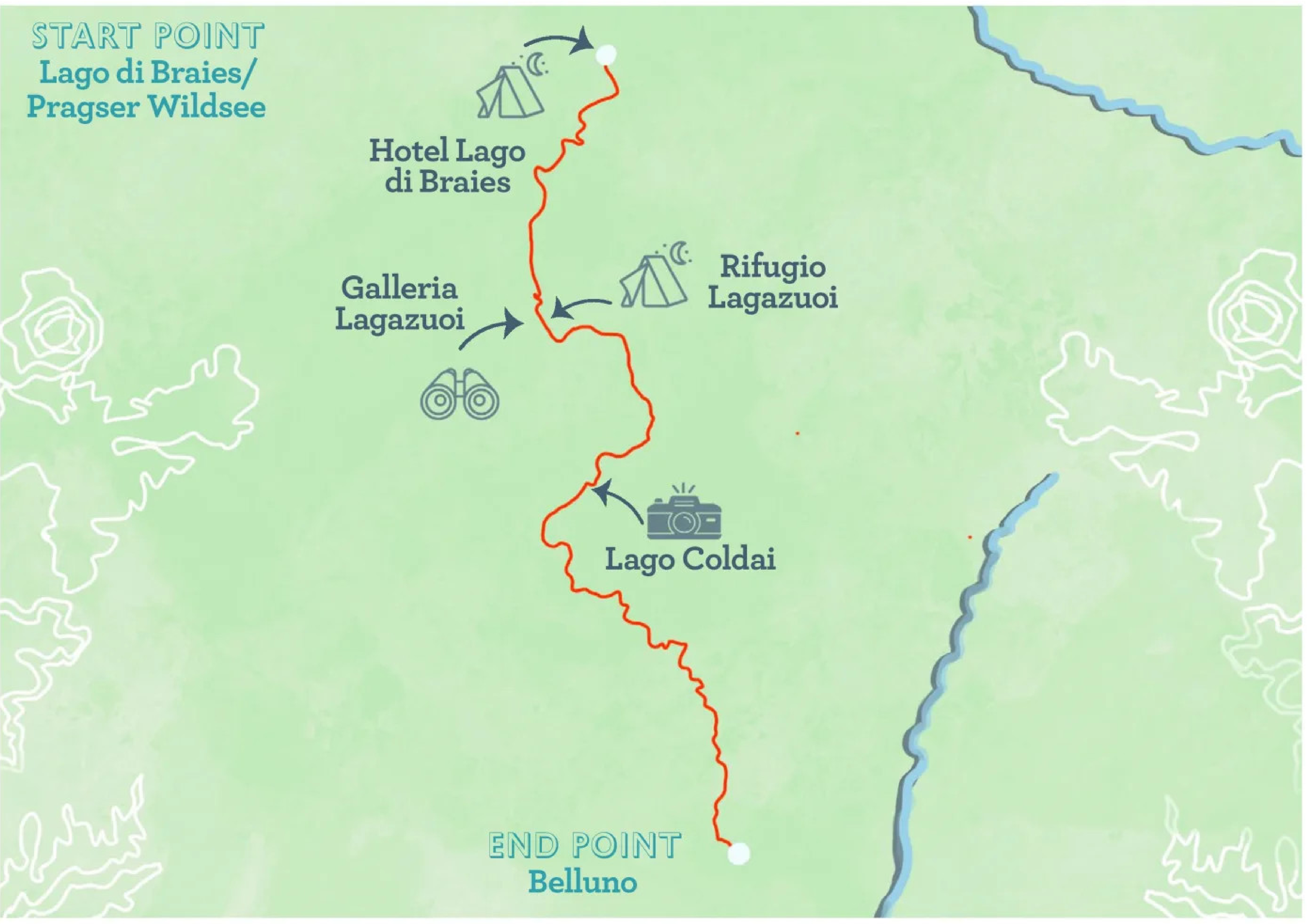
ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Camping along the route is forbidden, but there are plenty of mountain huts (rifugios) and valley hotels. It's a good idea to book well in advance, particularly for peak times like August.

USEFUL WEBSITES

dolomitemountains.com/en/browse-experiences/hiking
rifugiolagazuoi.com/index_en.php
lagodibraies.com/en

Marvel at the panoramic views of the Dolomites as you stop to rest at Lagazuoi



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SLOVAKIA/POLAND

RYSY, HIGH TATRAS

Climb to the top of the world and peer down into two different countries at once

20km/12.4mi

7-10 hours

Moderate

Out & Back

1,389m/4,557ft

When it comes to mountainous hikes in Europe, most would think of the Alps and its sprawl across eight different countries or the countless peaks of Scandinavia. Although the Tatra Mountains can hardly be considered 'hidden gems', it's a shame that they are often sitting in the shadow of Western Europe's more famous hikes.

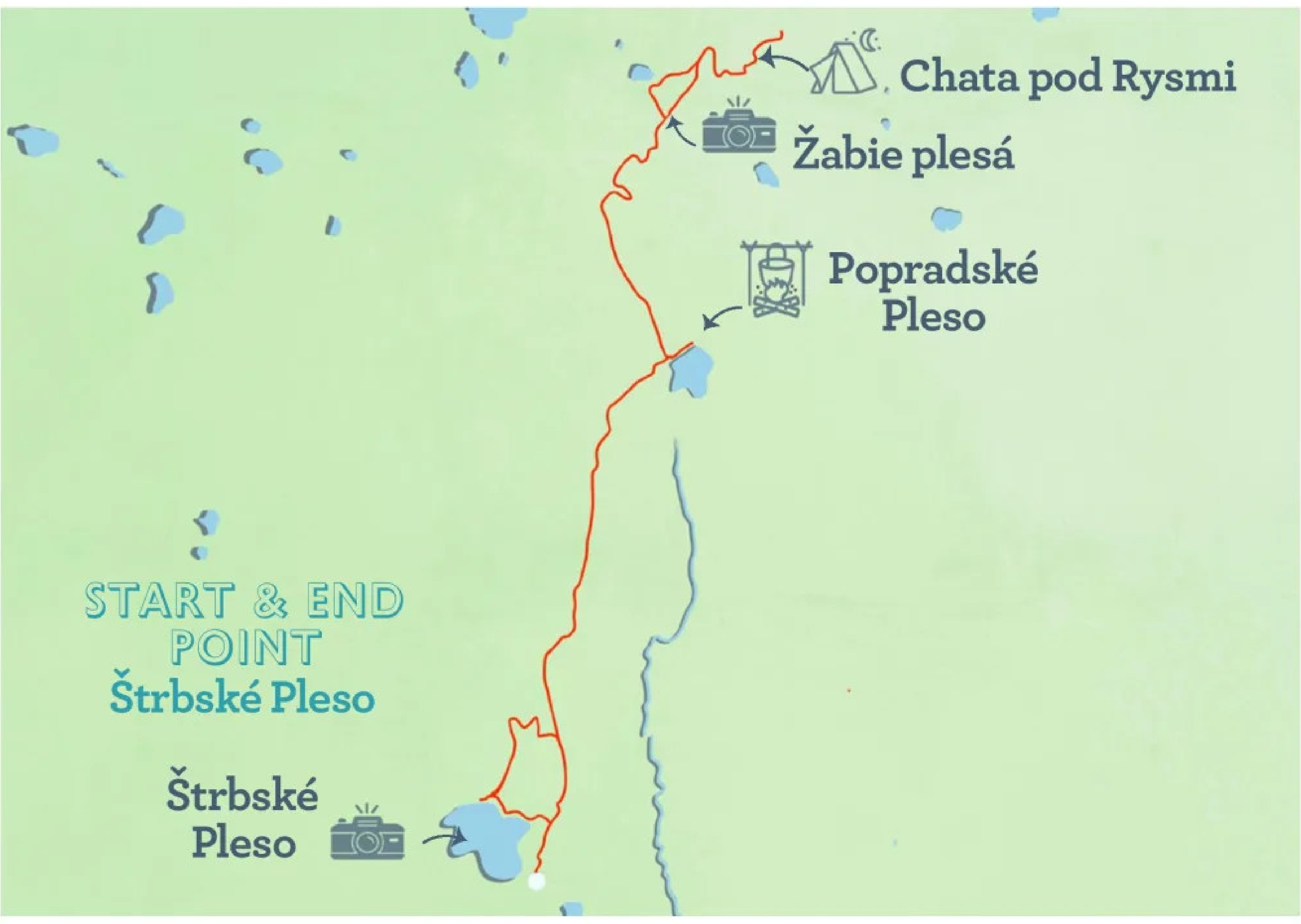
Separated into the Low Tatras and the High Tatras, the landscape is typified by lush greenery, deep-blue mountain lakes and sharp peaks in all angles and directions. The range is interesting since it actually acts as a natural border between Slovakia and Poland, and in fact the highest point in the area – the Rysy mountain – sits exactly on that border. Essentially, hiking up to the top of the High Tatras will have you teetering on the edge of two countries at the same time, and what could be more thrilling than that?

Since it is the highest point in the High Tatras that can be climbed without a guide and only requires a single day to conquer, it's perhaps no surprise that the route to Rysy can be a rather popular one. The peak itself is especially crowded, in part because of hikers in search of the grand views of the surrounding High Tatra mountain range; Rysy offers the perfect spot to view the cluster of mountains it is embedded within.

> "IT IS MORE COMMON TO TACKLE THE HIKE FROM THE SLOVAKIAN SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN"

It is more common to tackle the hike from the Slovakian side of the mountain from the trail head at Popradské Pleso (after a 90-minute walk from Štrbské Pleso), since it is considered an easier route. However, there is also the option to find your way here from Zakopane in Poland, too. In any case, the footfall on this expedition is high: on a pleasant summer's day you should expect to meet with numerous hikers on the route, and even have to stop to wait for others to pass (or for them to enable you to pass) at the narrower spots.

It's not exactly a breeze, either. Despite its popularity, like many of the hikes through the High Tatras, you're going to need a



Rysy sits on the border between Slovakia and Poland, and is the highest point in the latter

The region is characterised by lush-green forests and ocean-blue lakes

START POINT
ŠTRBSKÉ PLESO

END POINT
ŠTRBSKÉ PLESO

GETTING THERE

The main roads 537 and 538 will get you to Štrbské Pleso, and from there it's approximately a 90-minute walk to the official starting point of Popradské Pleso.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

If you don't mind colder air and icy paths, cooler months like May or September might be better to avoid the crowds of the summer months.

WHAT TO WEAR

Thin layers to keep warm the higher up you go are essential. If you go in the colder months, be prepared for snow at higher altitudes.

WHAT TO TAKE

Water and a packed lunch. This is only a day-long hike and there's no need to be over-prepared for this one.

PIT STOPS

There are a few novel items of interest at Chata pod Rysmi, including a joke bus stop!

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

If you fancy a little bit of luxury, there's a hotel at the Popradské Pleso lake – the official start of the trail. Why not treat yourself to a stay after a day's adventure?

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.vysoketatry.com/ciele/rysy/en.html
www.slovakia.com/national-parks/high-tatras
www.popradskepleso.sk

good deal of stamina, a strong pair of legs, and an early start to ensure you make it back down in one piece! A large part of this is the elevation gain, which is not nearly as intense as some of the world's toughest, but a steady and consistent gain of more than 1,300 metres (4,265 feet) over only a matter of hours is no easy feat for even the most weathered of ramblers. There are ladders and chains along the way, too, so it's not quite as simple as marching onward. And don't forget that you'll need to repeat that effort on the way back down, too, which as we all know is far more tiring than any of us ever expect it to be.

Don't be put off by this, though. The High Tatras can offer some truly spectacular views, but none more stunning than those on this hike. Stopping to rest your legs beside a shimmering alpine lake surrounded by sheer rock faces will create memories that will last forever. But the scramble to the top will also make it one to remember. This is a rough hike, more so than many day-long treks you might be used to in the Alps or America's great outdoors, and in that sense it still manages to retain something of a feral wildness about the journey – especially at the summit of the hike, where it becomes more about scaling the mountain rather than hiking it!

If you're lucky enough to get clear weather on the day of your hike, however, then there's no doubt that Rysy will provide you with some truly breathtaking views, and isn't that one of the most rewarding things about hiking? There are few one-day hikes that can feel quite as rewarding as this, and if you're looking for a less obvious European hike then this is the one to aim for. Whether you approach the summit from the Slovakian side or from Poland, you're certain to come away from the day's adventure with a definite sense of achievement, pride and more than a little bit of muscle pain.

There's every chance you'll encounter snow, even in the warmer months, so make sure you've come prepared with suitable footwear and clothes

© Getty Images, Pixabay | Words: Adam Barnes

EUROPE

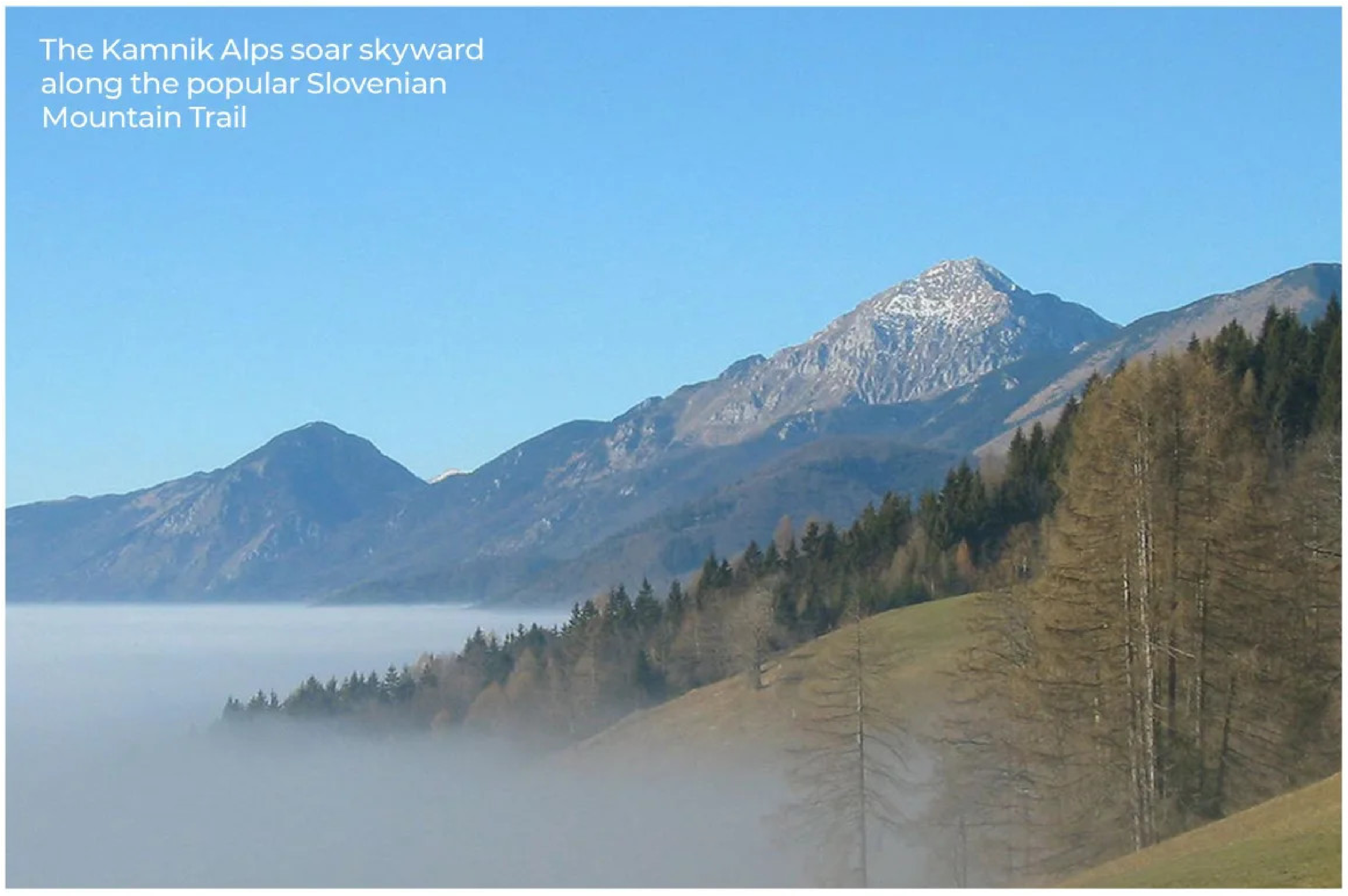
BEST OF THE REST

These fantastic European hikes, ranging from easy to strenuous, bring beautiful surroundings and the varied aspects of nature to life

SLOVENIAN MOUNTAIN TRAIL

Slovenia, Central Europe

One of the premiere long-distance hikes in Europe, the Slovenian Mountain Trail extends 617km (383mi) through the mountainous region of Slovenia, including the Julian Alps, Pohorje, the Karawanks, the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, and the country's highest peak, Triglav, which rises 2,864m (9,396ft) above sea level. The trail also courses through the scenic valleys and forests of southwestern Slovenia. Completing the entire trail from Maribor, Slovenia's second-largest city, to Ankaran, near the Italian frontier, typically requires about 30 days, although the record for the entire hike is just over a week. Camping is prohibited, and accommodation should be reserved at one of the 55 mountain huts, open from July to September, along the way. Certain sections require mountaineering skills, and planning ahead will assist in determining the best matches for individual hikers. Routes are well-marked with 'Knafelc blazes' – white dots in red circles. The trail is usually clear of snow from mid-June to September.



The Kamnik Alps soar skyward along the popular Slovenian Mountain Trail

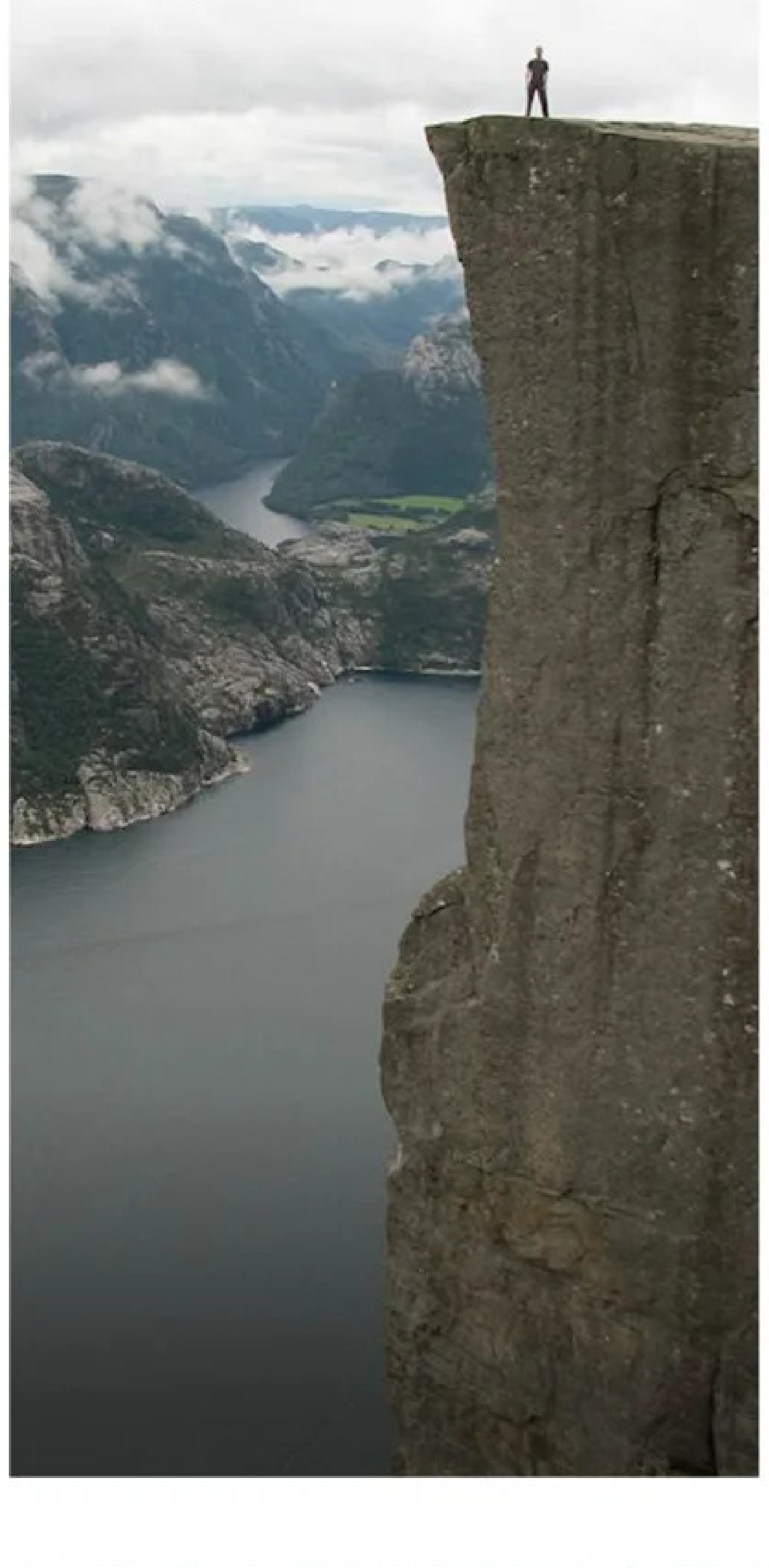
© WIKI/ Ziga

PREIKESTOLEN

Ryfylke, Norway

Carved into a mountain by glacial ice 10,000 years ago, Preikestolen, or Pulpit Rock, is a 6km (3.7mi) hike that yields breathtaking views of distant fjords, glaciers and mountaintops. Preikestolen soars to 604m (1,982ft) above the Lysefjord in the Ryfylke municipality of southwestern Norway. The entire hike may be completed in roughly four hours, and you should expect plenty of company. If you begin the trek before dawn, it's a great spot to witness the sunrise. The main hiking season extends from April to October and the terrain is slightly uphill, although hikers in good physical condition should encounter little difficulty. Dress in layers due to ever-changing weather conditions, and use caution at the cliff's edge. Preikestolen Mountain Lodge, where the trail begins, is easily accessible by bus or car from Stavanger.

The sheer cliff of Preikestolen, or Pulpit Rock, soars above Lysefjord in southwestern Norway

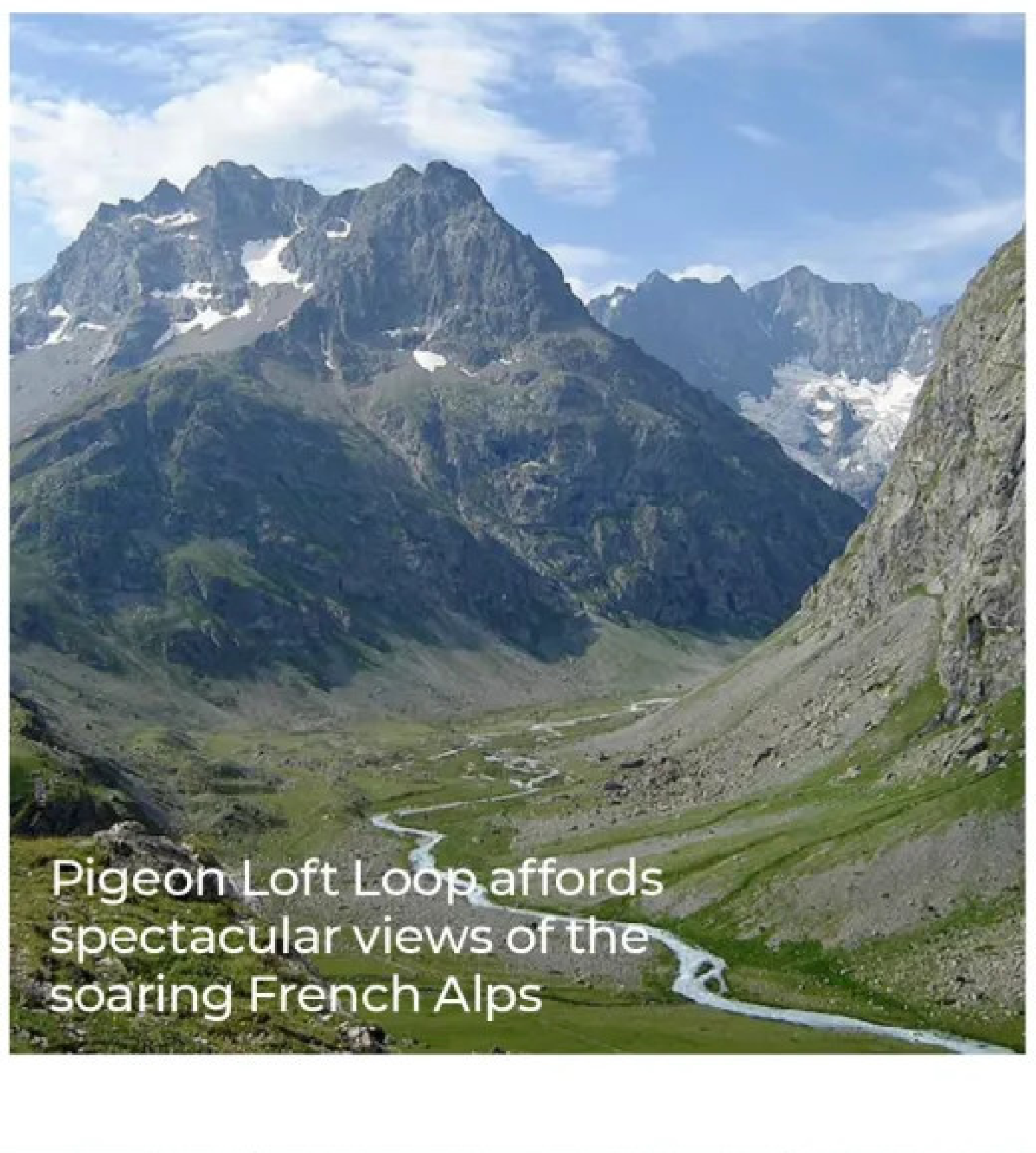


© WIKI/Mercy

PIGEON LOFT LOOP WALK

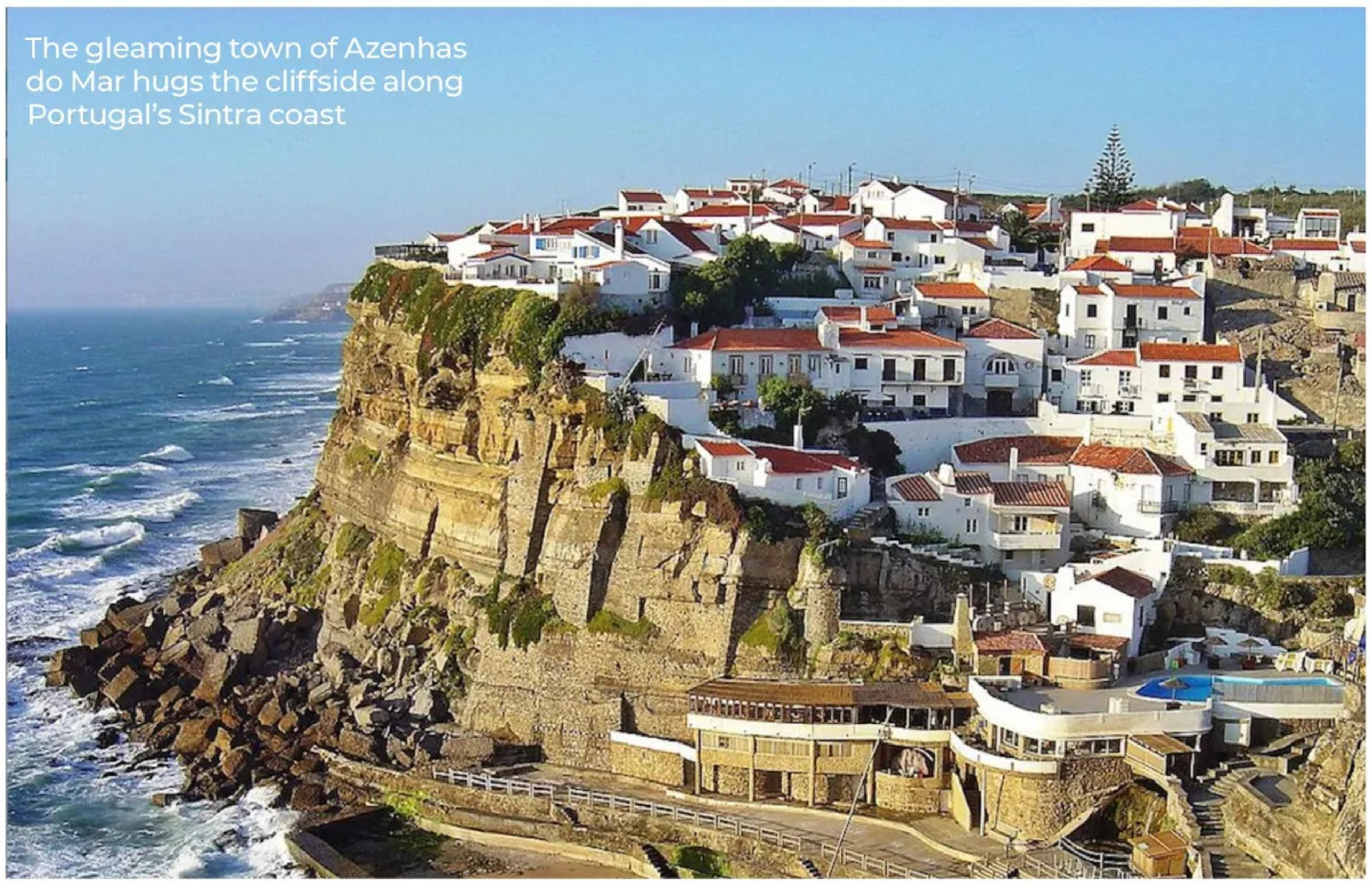
Écrins National Park, France

Just an hour by car from the city of Grenoble, 700km (435mi) of trails wind through the Écrins National Park, and hikers can expect glorious views of the surrounding French Alps, spectacular glaciers, lush woodlands and rolling alpine meadows rich in wildflowers and wildlife, including marmots, ibex, chamois and the golden eagle. Perhaps the best single-day route to explore here in the heart of the national park is the Pigeon Loft Loop, a 9.5km (5.9mi) hike beginning in Gioberney that requires about six hours and sturdy legs to enjoy fully. The ascent to the welcoming Refuge du Pigeonnier, where food and lodging are available for those who wish to linger, presents a test with its steep ascent to an altitude of 2,423m (7,949ft), but the fantastic views are well worth the exertion. Winding mountain paths enable hikers to stop and take in the distant scenery. Écrins National Park is one of 11 such preserves in France, attracting 8.5 million visitors each year.



Pigeon Loft Loop affords spectacular views of the soaring French Alps

© WIKI/ Rémih



The gleaming town of Azenhas do Mar hugs the cliffside along Portugal's Sintra coast

© WIKI/ Husond

CABO DA ROCA TO AZENHAS COASTAL TRAIL

Sintra coast, Portugal

The westernmost point in mainland Europe, Cabo da Roca is a popular tourist destination. However, the crowds begin to thin as hikers take to the 10.8km (6.7mi) coastal trail winding toward Azenhas do Mar, a quaint seaside town of sun-splashed homes hugging the cliffside at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Hikers with average skills easily negotiate this five-hour journey past breathtaking ocean views, rocky coastlines and the pristine Praia da Ursa ('Bear Beach'), where unique rock formations appear to have fallen from the heavens. Continuing past the shimmering sands of Praia da Adraga, Praia Grande and Praia das Maçãs, hikers pause to admire the surrounding natural beauty. Sintra's architectural wonders include the Castle of the Moors, Monserrate Palace and Pena Palace within Sintra-Cascais Natural Park. The Sintra coast is about 25km (15.5mi) from the capital of Lisbon, and easily accessible by bus and train. One-way train fares are approximately £2.90 ($4).

HÆRVEJEN

Jutland Peninsula, Denmark

Sections of Hærvejen, known as the Ox Road or the Ancient Road, date back 4,000 years, and in modern times the historic trek has become the most famous hiking trail in Denmark. Running the length of Danish Jutland, Hærvejen extends 500km (310.7mi), and those who seek its forests, meadows, sand dunes and beaches may choose an itinerary of 14 days or more. Numerous shorter hikes are popular and extend along well-marked portions of the Ancient Road. Alternatives include moderate hikes in Northwest Jutland, the Himmerland, Northeast Jutland, South Jutland and Middle Jutland, each with its own charms and character. Those embarking on longer routes will find farmsteads and wayside locations offering food and accommodation. Tours are available, relieving the hiker of worries regarding lodging and baggage.

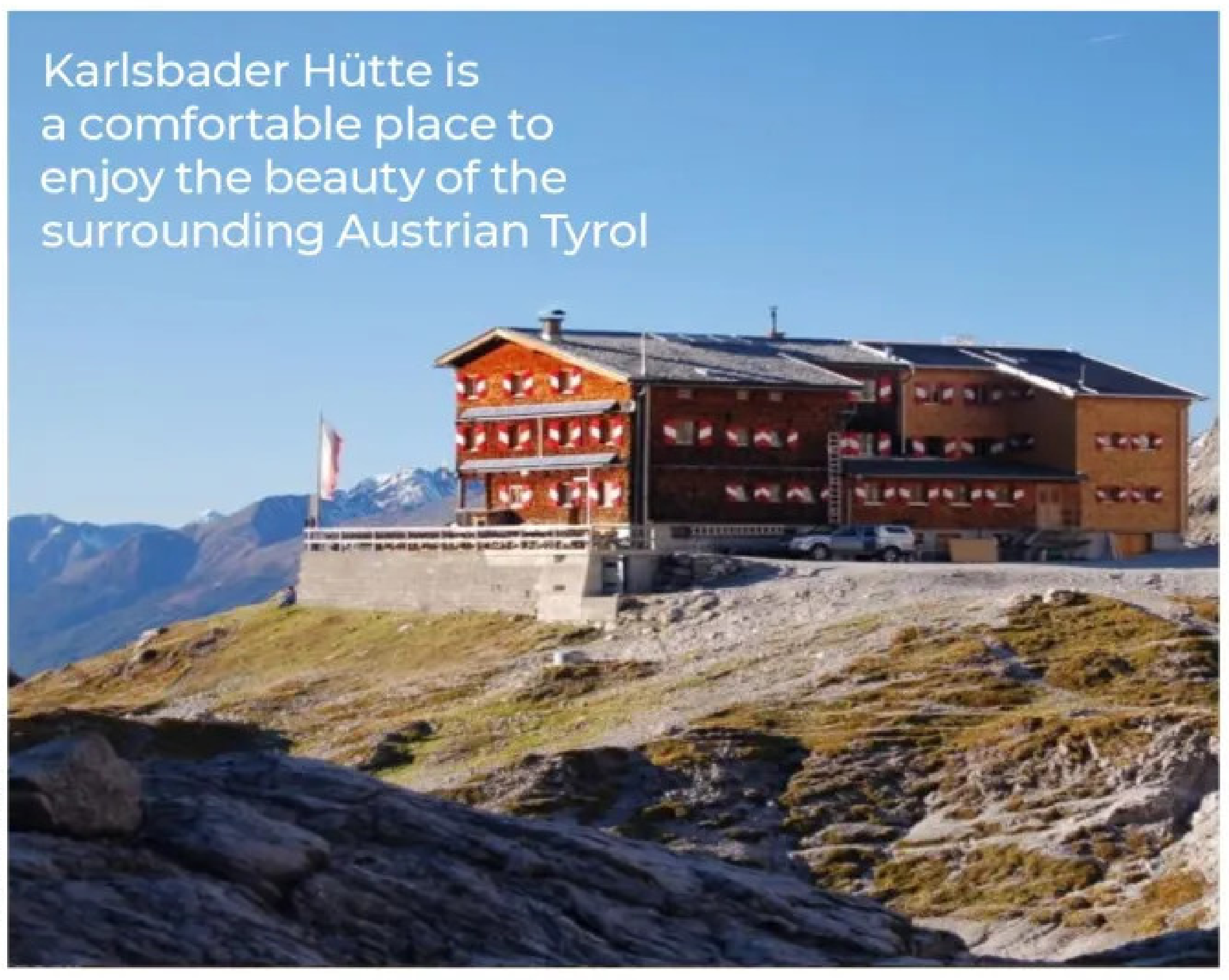
The stone Povls Bridge on the Ancient Road

© WIKI/Jorgen Rasmussen

KARLSBADER HÜTTE

East Tyrol, Austria

Sitting at 2,260m (7,415m) among the peaks of the Dolomites in Austria's stunning East Tyrol, Karlsbader Hütte is a well-known gathering place for hikers, climbers and mountain bikers alike. The 4.3km (2.67mi) one-way hike to this picturesque locale, where good food and overnight accommodation may be secured, is a pleasant journey any time from late June to September. The moderately difficult hike takes about two hours to complete from the trailhead at Dolomitenhütte above the town of Lienz. As the hike progresses, the view becomes more dramatic with limestone formations rising skyward or plunging into deep ravines. Karlsbader Hütte is located next to the crystal-clear Laserzsee lake and is the base for further hikes, should you wish. Access to the trailhead is by car, and a £7 ($9.60) toll is charged.



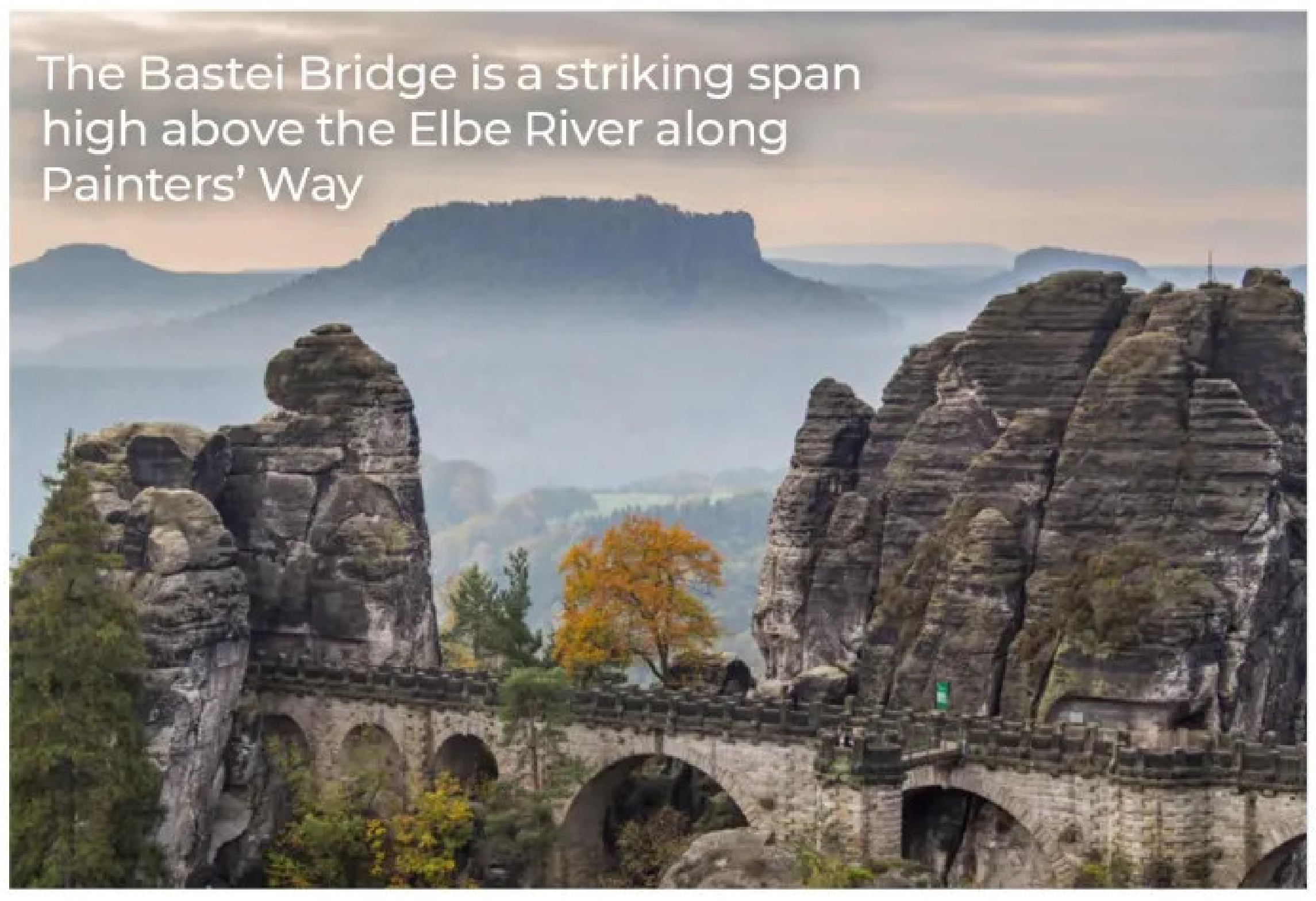
Karlsbader Hütte is a comfortable place to enjoy the beauty of the surrounding Austrian Tyrol

© WIKI/pja2

PAINTERS' WAY

Free State of Saxony, Germany

The sandstone formations of the Elbe Mountains beckon hikers in the region of Saxony to experience a fairy-tale adventure! Painters' Way (known locally as the Malerweg Trail) is a 112km (69.6mi) round-trip from the town of Pirna along the Elbe River, and is among the best for views of cliffs, evergreen forests and meadows. Sections of the hike are strenuous, requiring above-average skills, but the breathtaking scenery is worth it. As you might expect from its name, Painters' Way has inspired many artists, and movies such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* were filmed there. The full route requires eight or nine days, but it's very well signposted, and small inns welcome weary hikers for overnight stays. The city of Dresden (easily accessible from Berlin) is just a short train ride away.



The Bastei Bridge is a striking span high above the Elbe River along Painters' Way

© Alamy

Words: Mike Haskew

LOOK OUT FOR THESE SYMBOLS OVER THE FOLLOWING PAGES

- DISTANCE
- DURATION
- DIFFICULTY
- ROUTE TYPE
- ELEVATION GAIN
- PHOTO OPPORTUNITY
- PLACE TO STAY
- PLACE OF INTEREST
- PLACE TO EAT

AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

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SIMIEN TREK, ETHIOPIA

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BEST OF THE REST

© Getty Images

ETHIOPIA

SIMIEN TREK

Lush landscapes and mountain views await any hiker following this classic route

25km/15.5mi | 2-3 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 400m/1,312ft

START POINT
SANKABER

END POINT
CHENNEK

GETTING THERE

Start at the town of Debark, the location of the national park's headquarters where guides will assist you before driving to Sankaber.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

You should embark on your trip between September to November, avoiding the rains of the previous three months.

WHAT TO WEAR

A waterproof jacket will keep you warm on the chilly mountain peaks, and it's a good idea to take some jumpers too.

WHAT TO TAKE

Water purifying tablets are worth taking because some of the camp cooks will warm rather than boil water.

PIT STOPS

The three camps will provide natural pit stops for you, providing basic facilities. The guides will cook food.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Again, rely on the camps for your rest. The accommodation will obviously be under the stars in tents.

USEFUL WEBSITES

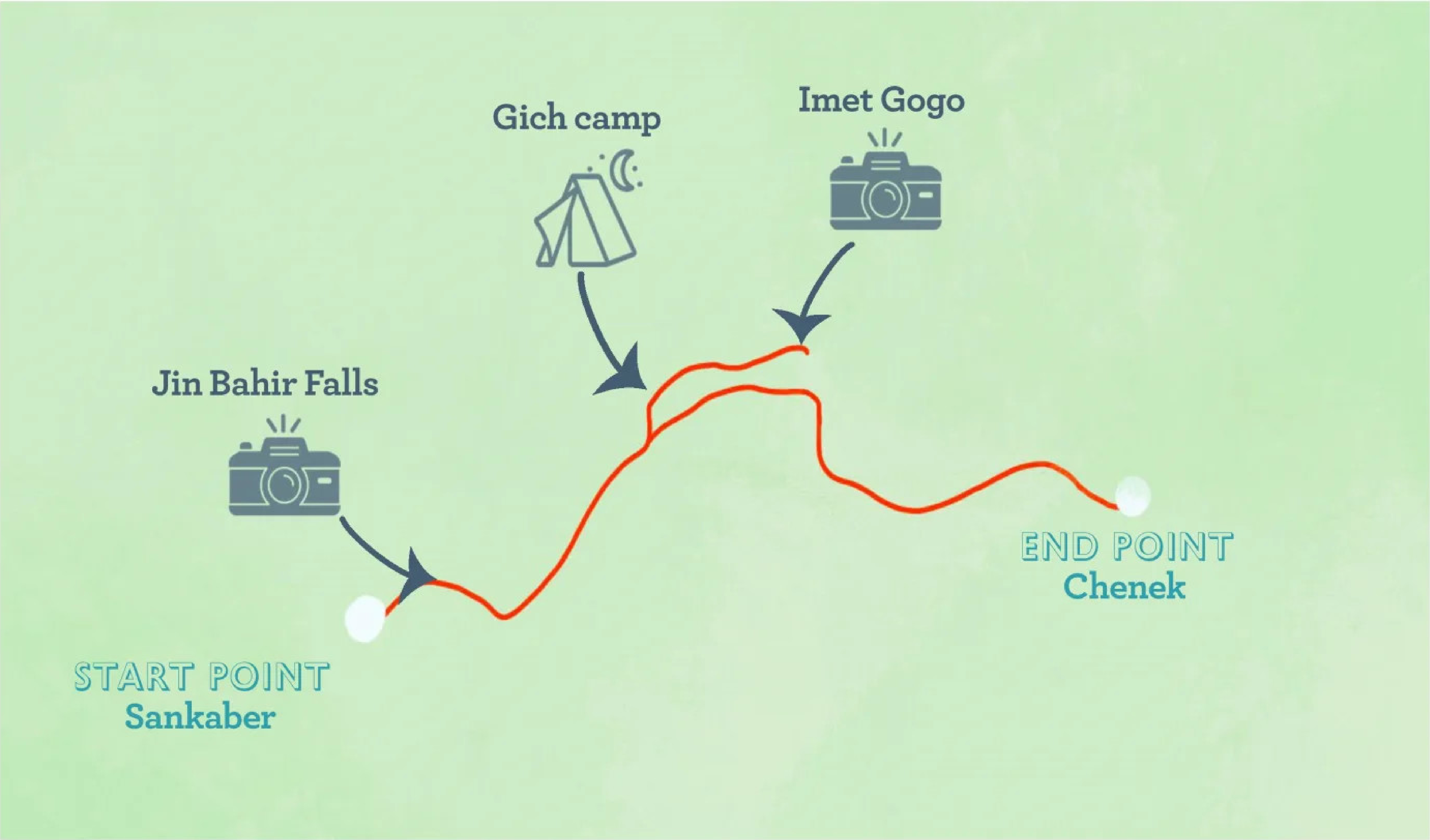
www.simienmountainstrekking.com
www.northexpeditionsethiopia.com
www.brilliant-ethiopia.com/regions/simien-mountains-national-park

The Simien Mountains National Park in Ethiopia was granted UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1978. Often dubbed the 'roof of Africa', its peaks are a popular destination for tourists with efforts made in recent years to better cater for a growing influx of people, making a hike far more pleasurable than it perhaps used to be.

The route between Sankaber and Chennek, passing through Gich, is one of the most striking routes, and one that has long been established with decent camping facilities and experienced tour guides. It's not going to set you down a well-maintained path, but it's a trail that has been created by those local to the area to make their way from one village to another and to reach workable land, which helps to make it very walkable.

Being close to the sky in an area that includes Ethiopia's highest point, Ras Dejen, is life-affirming enough, but it means the views on this trail are worth every steep step that you make. It's an area teeming with incredible wildlife, some of which you will not see anywhere else – the endangered walia ibex goat, of which there are only around 500, being among them. The landscape is also filled with endemic plants, including the giant lobelia, whose huge stark-green leaves punctuate the air and give a feeling that you've stepped back thousands of years.

Look up and you will see raptors and vultures soaring overhead, the bearded vulture among the most spectacular with its wingspan of over two metres (6.6 feet). But focusing on the task ahead, you should certainly prepare yourself for the dramatic landscapes that lay in wait for you during your trek, a taste of which can be had by first of all bedding down in Sankaber where



The Simien Mountains National Park is home to large numbers of gelada monkeys

one of the mountain's three major campsites are located.

Here, you'll already feel at one with nature thanks to the abundance of giant heath trees, and you will have plenty of time to relax with a welcoming drink before you start the following day bright and early. This will begin with a trip east and a small descent into the Koba River Valley. You're going to experience a network of long, steep slopes and canyons, colourfully decorated with a fantastic array of flourishing flora.

The first of the two sections takes you from Sankaber to Gich, and it involves a climb up. This will enable you to reach the canyon known as Gich Abyss, the extent of which you can view by clamouring up towards a cliff. The vantage point lets you watch a huge cascade of water dropping 500 metres (1,640 feet) into the canyon at the Jin Bahir Falls, and you can then forge your way further along the river, make a crossing, and reach the second campsite of the hike at Gich, which is located at an exposed spot close to the local village. The inhabitants will teach you much about their fascinating life.

By this stage, you'll have been hiking for some seven hours, so you'll be thankful for the rest ahead of the second leg of the journey on to Chennek. Thankfully, it's now a case of saving the best part of the trip until the end because here you will have the finest of views of the area's major peaks, following the plateau eastwards towards the impressive Imet Gogo mountain, which stands at over 3,900 metres (12,795 feet), and feasting your eyes on Ethiopia's unique northern wilderness of soaring peaks.

A dip into the valley and a climb up Innatiye sees you on your way to the final destination via the rest of the trail, which will ensure you reach Chennek in plenty of time to watch the sun setting at the third and final camp. It's worth pointing out that gelada monkeys live in the Ethiopian highlands, too, so you're likely to find yourself among these delightful, protected animals as they graze on the grass blades that make up the bulk of their diet, their silver manes glistening in the sun.

It's certainly a wonderful campsite flanked by the slopes of Mount Bwahit and a highlight in and of itself. What's more, it's separated from the crowning glory of these peaks (Ras Dejen) by a gorge that is some 1,600 metres (5,250 feet) deep – another stunning example of the jagged landscape that any nature lover can't help but fall in love with.

© Getty Images | Words: David Crookes

JORDAN

JORDAN TRAIL

An odyssey of sand and stone, reverberating with the secrets of ancient civilisations

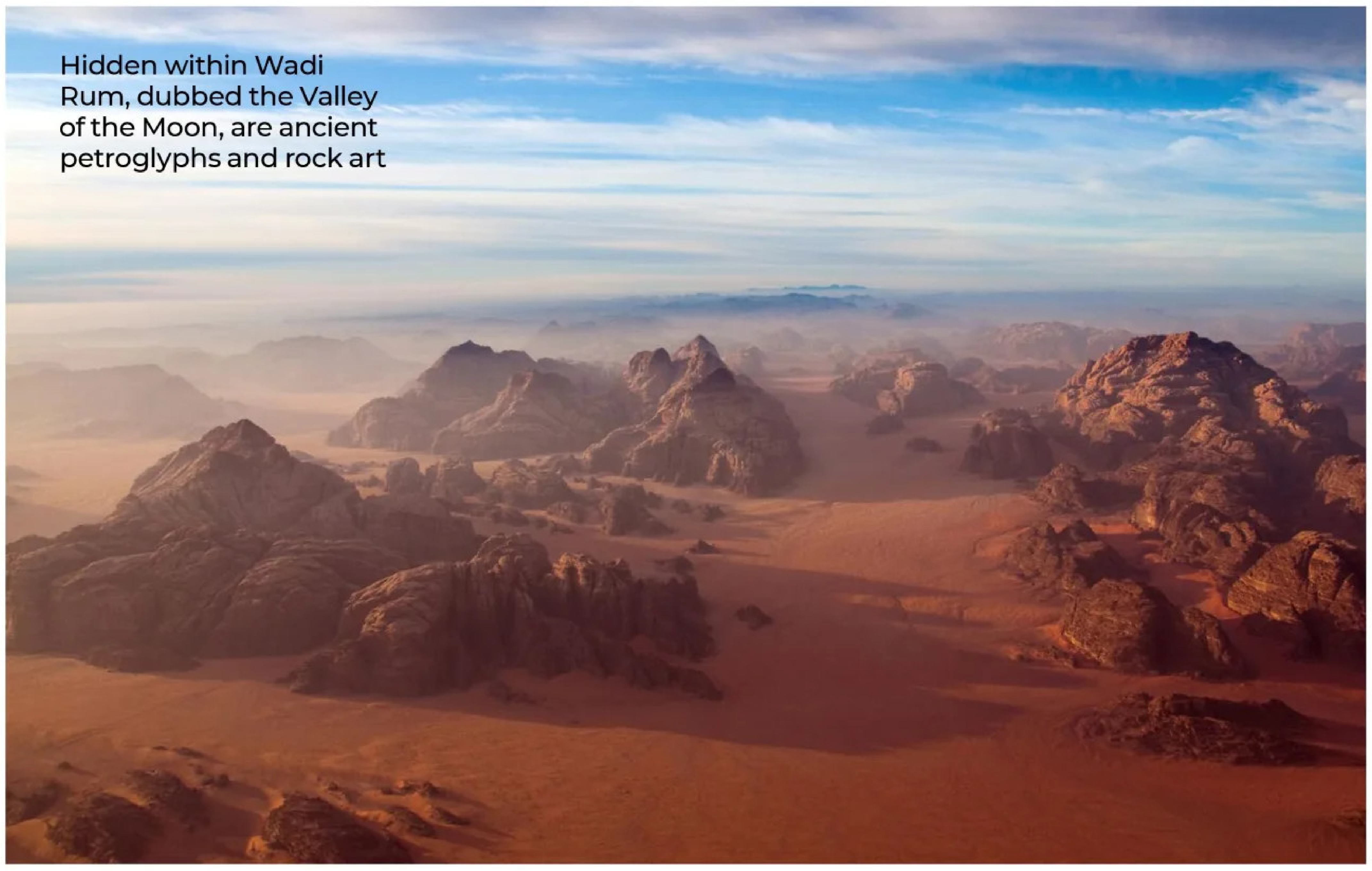
675km/419mi | 40 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 17,000m/55,770ft

Following the footsteps of Crusaders and conquerors, Jordan's 675-kilometre (419-mile), cross-country trail connects Umm Qais in the north to the Red Sea in the south. An ode to diversity and history, it embodies the very essence of Jordan – propelling hikers through forests, granite wadis and ochre-hued desert.

The basalt ruins of the Decapolis of Umm Qais mark the starting point of the Jordan Trail. From there, it winds through the country's most fertile reaches, past colossal dams and canyons, splattered with vestiges of ancient civilisations. Navigating the Jordan Rift Valley, the trail sweeps through the village of Beit Idis before meandering past the ruins of a Byzantine monastery in Tell Mar Elias, believed to be the birthplace of the prophet Elijah, and the medieval castle of Ajloun.

Skimming across wadis and olive groves, the route nudges past an abandoned village before descending to Burma. Wrapping around the village, it dives down to King Talal Dam and the village of Rmeimeen, where mosque minaret and church spire rise side by side. Leaving the village behind, the trail squeezes through a narrow valley to reach the historical city of Salt. From there, hikers are lured to the ancient palace and copper-age caves of Iraq al-Amir. Crossing a plateau above the Dead Sea, unobstructed views of the Jordan Valley and the hills of Palestine beyond are revealed. Following a camel track, the trail slumps through basalt cliffs, into the gaping chasms of Wadi Zarqa Ma'in. Dotted with Bedouin camps, sheep and goats conquer the rocky outcrops, while shepherds keep a watchful eye.

Descending south to the glistening pools and waterfalls of Wadi Hidan, hikers can cool their weary feet, before tumbling 800 metres (2,625 feet) into the mouth of Wadi Mujib – a colossal, weatherworn canyon of tortured sandstone. Climbing a series of immense ridges, the long-abandoned village of Majdalein emerges. From here, the magnificent crusader castle of Karak, where the legendary Saladin fought French invaders, appears on the horizon.


Hidden within Wadi Rum, dubbed the Valley of the Moon, are ancient petroglyphs and rock art

Take time to discover the 'Lost City' of Petra

START POINT
UMM QAIS

END POINT
THE RED SEA

GETTING THERE

Umm Qais can be reached from Amman via public buses, with a change in Irbid – these don't follow a set schedule, but leave when full.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

March and April to avoid the scorching summer.

WHAT TO WEAR

While days can be warm, nights are often incredibly cold, so insulated layers are recommended. Hikers should dress modestly, with knees and shoulders covered.

WHAT TO TAKE

Wild-camping equipment, such as tents, sleeping bags and solar chargers are essential, as is a compass, a GPS device and topographical maps.

PIT STOPS

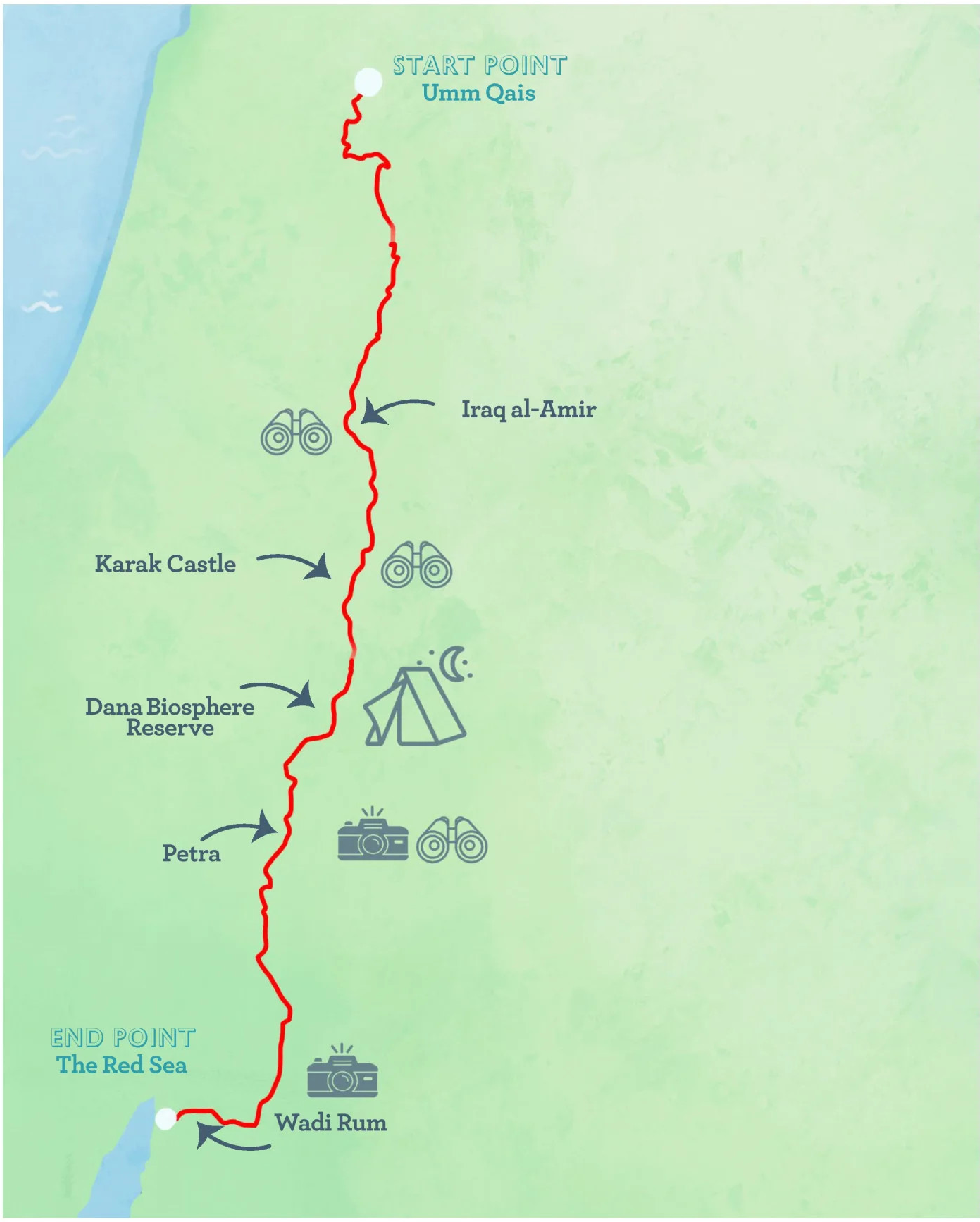
There are few cafés and restaurants outside the main tourist areas, so hikers will need to carry their food. Water drops must be arranged through local companies.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

The majority of the trail requires wild camping.

USEFUL WEBSITES

jordantrail.org
www.visitjordan.com
www.experiencejordan.com



Exiting Karak's southern gate, the Jordan Trail winds through limestone valleys, past the orchards and olive groves of Al Iraq. From here, it hugs the ridgeline to Wadi al-Hasa, before dancing between the towering limestone cliffs of Tor al-Taboun. The route shadows the river to Burbeita Hot Springs, as olive groves line the path to the clifftop village of Ma'tan. Pushing south, solitary cypress trees give way to moon-like rock formations as Wadi Dana and the Dana Biosphere Reserve come into focus.

Snaking across bone-dry river beds, the trail follows hidden canyons, Roman copper mines and labyrinthine valleys lined with fragrant oleander. Climbing and descending, it fades into the rust-hued desert, passing Bedouin camps, before rolling into Little Petra. Here, the journey traverses an ancient route, past the Stone Age village of Al Beidha, to deliver hikers to the 'Lost City' of Petra. Carved directly into colossal cliffs, blushing red, the prehistoric capital is testament to the genius of its founders.

From Petra, the trail slithers through rose-hued desert into the open wilderness to Wadi Rum. The week-long stretch escapes the rugged Wadi Sabra and Wadi Abu O'Rouq, before getting to the spring Ain Al O'Rouq. Oleander and dragonflies accompany it to Wadi Al Saif, before a buttress of red-and-white sandstone cliffs rise in the distance. Gently curving south, the route clings to the Bedouin village of Abbasiya and the ruins of Humeima, before propelling travellers into the heart of Wadi Rum, the strikingly desolate region made famous by the film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Mars-like, beautifully stark and merciless, the sun casts shadows over Wadi Rum's serrated peaks and razor-toothed mountains. Like one of its camel spiders, the trail wriggles between the cliffs of the petroglyph-adorned Jebel Khazali, before crossing Jebel Qattar. Padding across a vast ocean of sand and rock, it pushes on towards Jabal Kharazeh, made recognisable by its wind-sculpted arch, then slips between the twin Jabal Abu Rashrasha mountains. Close by, a large cairn marks the spot of a small graveyard. Dancing across desert, the route conquers wadis and granite mountains until rewarding hikers with glimpses of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. Scrambling down the water's edge, the trail terminates in the crystalline waters, a fitting end to an epic journey.

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TANZANIA

KILIMANJARO'S MARANGU ROUTE

A gruelling, yet accessible, odyssey to the roof of Africa

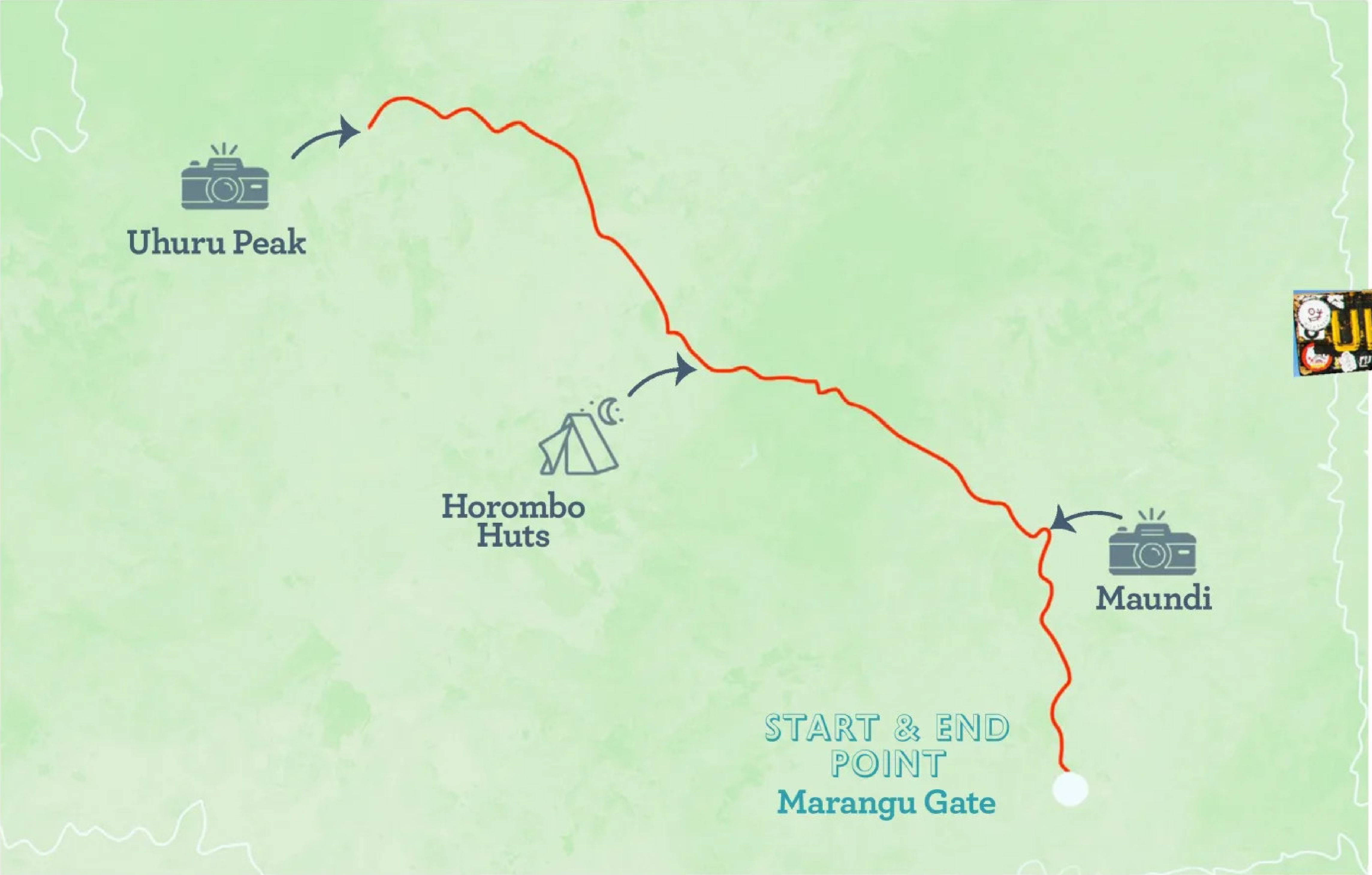
70km/43mi 6 days Moderate Out & Back 4,000m/13,120ft

Erupting from the flat, acacia-studded Tanzanian plains, Mount Kilimanjaro rises 5,895 metres (19,340 feet) skywards. Instantly recognisable, the solitary, snow-streaked peak is the highest free-standing mountain on Earth. A megalith towering over the storied plains of Africa, it is a landmark of nature's own design. Born of three volcanic cones – Kibo, Mawenzi and Shira – Kilimanjaro rises in perfect symmetry but entirely alone, without an accompanying massif. While Mawenzi and Shira are extinct, Kibo is merely dormant. Although it last erupted around 360,000 years ago, it could, theoretically, once again spew lava across the golden savannah.

Sitting high on Kibo's crater, Uhuru – the Swahili word for 'freedom' – marks Kilimanjaro's highest point and the ultimate prize for the 50,000 hikers who attempt to summit it each year. First conquered in 1889, in recent years, the Tanzanian mountain has become one of world's most-fabled hiking challenges. And, since the summit requires no technical skill – ropes and crampons are not necessary – it gives uninitiated mountaineers the unique opportunity to stand atop one of the world's seven summits.

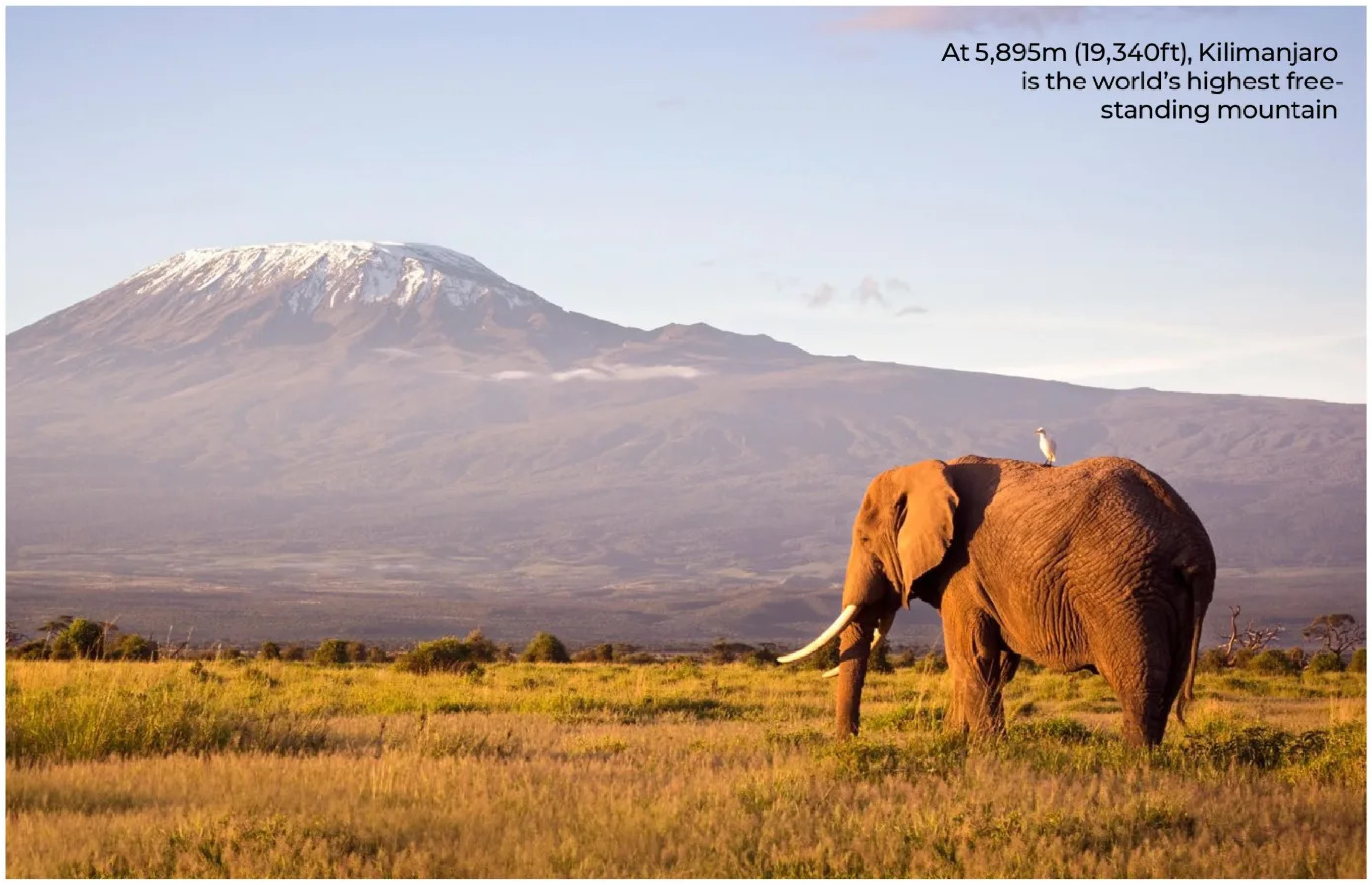
Known as the 'Coca-Cola' route, the 70-kilometre (43-mile) Marangu is the oldest of all Kilimanjaro's trails, and the only one to provide hut accommodation – the others require camping. In addition, Marangu is also one of the most direct routes to the summit, though acclimatisation often proves problematic if adequate rest days are not scheduled. As a result, almost half of the summit attempts made via this route fail. Nevertheless, this lung-busting route traverses emerald green forest, alpine

You could be lucky enough to see some of the region's amazing wildlife during your hike



CONGRATULATIONS
YOU ARE NOW AT
UHURU PEAK, TANZANIA 5895M AMSL
AFRICA'S HIGHEST POINT
ORLD'S HIGHEST FREE-STANDING M TAIN

Uhuru Peak marks Kilimanjaro's summit, and the highest point in Africa



At 5,895m (19,340ft), Kilimanjaro is the world's highest free-standing mountain

meadows and dramatic mountain peaks, before catapulting hikers through five different ecosystems and delivering them to the roof of Africa.

Standing at 1,870 metres (6,135 feet) above sea level, on the southeastern flank of Mount Kilimanjaro, Marangu Gate marks the start of its namesake route. Under the watchful gaze of Kilimanjaro, the muddy trail gradually rises on a ridgeline, through tropical rainforest shrouded in mist, towards the elusive peak above the clouds. Protected in the leafy canopies of fragrant eucalyptus, confusingly named blue monkeys, olive baboons and black-and-white colobus monkeys groom each other, while docile elephants and the formidable Cape buffalos jostle for territory below. Teeming with wildlife, the mountain's lower reaches are also home to leopards, zebra and hyenas, though sightings are extremely rare.

Through a maze of ferns, towering sycamore trees and twisted juniper, the route climbs 800 metres (2,625 feet), to the melodic soundtrack of birdsong. As the trail widens, gently rolling hills come into focus, falling headfirst into the endless flat below. At Mandara, a group of Alpine-inspired wooden A-frame huts dot a clearing, and come equipped with solar-generated lighting, a communal dining hall, flush toilets and running water, piped from a nearby mountain stream.

Continuing north, the Marangu Route sweeps quickly through a short stretch of forest, where ancient trees drenched in

START POINT
MARANGU GATE

END POINT
MARANGU GATE

GETTING THERE

Select airlines fly directly to Kilimanjaro Airport. Alternatively, transfers from Nairobi to Moshi should be arranged. From Moshi, hikers will be driven to Marangu Gate.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

January to February or July to October for warm, dry weather.

WHAT TO WEAR

A sweat-wicking base layer and polarised sunglasses, which stop reflections from the snow, are particularly beneficial for this hike.

WHAT TO TAKE

Trekking poles and a head torch are essential for the final push to Uhuru Peak. Ear plugs are recommended for light sleepers.

PIT STOPS

Trekking companies usually have a chef who prepares packed lunches and hearty dinners. Toilets are available at sleeping huts and some picnic spots.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Marangu is the only Kilimanjaro route that offers dormitory-style sleeping huts, so hikers should prepare to share with between 6 and 12 people.

USEFUL WEBSITES

tanzaniatourism.go.tz
kiliporters.org
gladysadventure.com

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ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Besides Marangu, six other routes dissect Mount Kilimanjaro – Machame, Rongai, Lemosho, Shira, Umbwe and Mweka – however, not all are recommended for novice hikers. Steep but scenic, the 62km (37mi) Machame is a popular alternative to Marangu, despite its difficulty. Taking seven days on average, it encourages gradual acclimatisation. Sweeping through forest and heathery moorland, it gives hikers longer to adapt to elevation gain by climbing high and sleeping low. It also passes through arid semi-deserts, before skirting the glacial precipices of Kibo.

Starting at the Kenyan border, the Rongai Route cuts across the northeastern face of Kilimanjaro. Snaking through rural lowlands, it provides a rare glimpse of traditional Chagga village life. In contrast, the Lemosho trail veers west towards Uhuru. Traversing the wild and rugged Shira Plateau, this eight-day route tiptoes around the caldera, or cauldron-like rim, of Shira volcano before ducking beneath the southern icefields of Kibo. From here, it climbs to Uhuru via Gilman's Point.

While the Northern Circuit is not technically a route, its clever combination of existing trails is designed specifically for solitude seekers. Picking through Kilimanjaro's most remote reaches, this 85-kilometre (53-mile) detour is the longest way to Uhuru. The ten-day voyage begins at Londorossi Gate, before weaving from Shira Ridge to the Shira Plateau. From here, it heads north and circles Moir Hut before continuing on to Buffalo Camp and School Hut; finally summiting Uhuru from the east.

The 72km (44mi) Rongai Route takes seven days on average, and requires camping along the route

Endemic giant groundsel grows up to 5m (16ft) high, near Horombu Hut

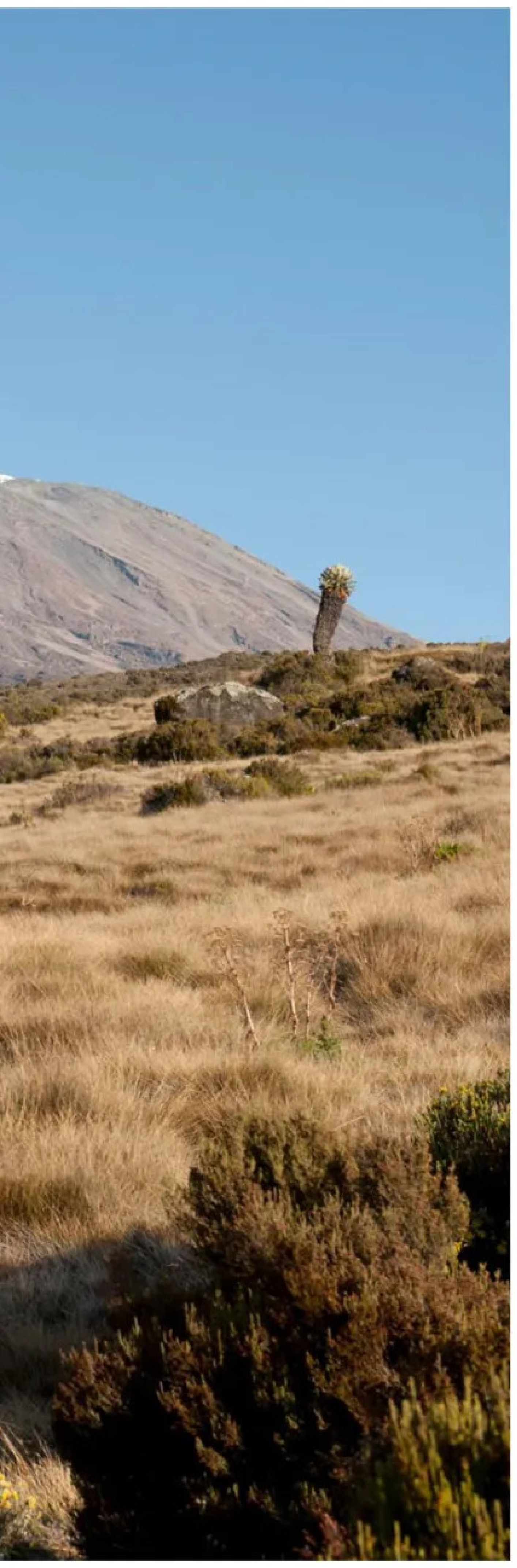
"THE FINAL STRETCH OF THE ROUTE IS BLANKETED IN ICING-SUGAR SNOW"

usnea, or 'old man's beard', offer shade to the sunny-hued, flowering buds of St John's wort. Overhead, green wood hoopoes, tropical boubous, and silvery-cheeked hornbills flit through canopies of green, feeding their young. With more than 700 other bird species calling this stretch home, the hike to Kilimanjaro doubles as a bird-watcher's paradise.

Emerging from the forest, the trail curves around the base of the Maundi Crater as the fierce equatorial sun beats down strongly overhead. On clear days, a short, scrambling detour to the crater's summit reveals magnificent views all the way to Kenya, as well as a tantalising first glimpse of the almost-symmetrical Kibo Crater – its glistening glaciers spewing out like icy lava. Nudging on, the trail slithers effortlessly into low alpine moorland, fringed with billowing cushions of heather. Meadows unfurl, studded with three-metre-tall (ten-foot-tall) giant lobelia, reminiscent of upside-down palm trees, and the extremely rare giant groundsel, which can grow up to five metres (16 feet) tall. On the horizon rise the mismatched twin spires of Kibo and Mawenzi, two of three volcanic peaks that make up Kilimanjaro's summit. While Kibo's snow-glazed brow juts up like an almighty wall, Mawenzi's serrated fingertips claw ferociously at the blue sky.

After navigating ravines, a rocky valley opens out to a small plateau, home to Horombo Hut. Dotted with wooden lodges, the picturesque spot has enough beds for 120 climbers. Bustling with both ascending and descending adventurers, hikers are advised to spend two nights here to adjust to elevation change. A scenic detour, which pushes north to Mawenzi Hut, rises steeply up a grassy slope past the unusual Zebra Rocks – making an ideal day-long acclimatisation hike. After a gruelling climb, ramblers are rewarded with magnificent views of Kibo, which often appears to be floating above the clouds.

Leaving Horombo, heathery moorland gradually gives way to a stark Martian landscape – where the only greenery that survives are sporadic tufts of golden grass and the rare, everlasting flower. Following



The views over Africa are stunning, especially against a setting sun

© Getty Images

the lower fork, the trail snakes through the 'Saddle', a rubbled lava-covered expanse of alpine desert sandwiched between the peaks of Mawenzi and Kibo. After climbing to 4,130 metres (13,550 feet), the spot signposted 'Last Water Point' reminds hikers to fill up water bottles, as there are no other water points until arriving back at Horombo, after the summit.

Traversing the windswept lunar desert, the Marangu Route becomes rockier as the air grows thinner and the cold begins to bite. Accompanied by the wise words 'pole, pole', or 'slowly, slowly', the path winds upwards, as the wilderness of East Africa unfolds below – until the outline of the stone-built Kibo Hut emerges on a gravel road. Sitting at 4,740 metres (15,551 feet) above sea level, it's the last rest stop before the final push to Uhuru. As the open sky fades from blue to flaming vermilion, the clouds wilt and Kilimanjaro bathes in the dying light.

After a few hours' sleep, hikers begin the final push to Uhuru Peak under the cover of a frosty night, beneath an inky-black sky exploding with stars. A frozen, rocky path rises 450 metres (1,476 feet) to Hans Meyer Cave, via a twinkling trail of tiny headlamps, as hikers shuffle on ahead. Zigzagging across a steep, scree slope, the route dips between house-sized boulders, to Gilman's Point. With the most demanding section of the route over, hikers are greeted by ribbons of light, cracking over Mawenzi Peak.

The final stretch is blanketed in icing-sugar snow, save for a few rocks laced with lichen, and requires climbers to move slowly and deliberately. Clinging perilously to an ice-rimmed glacier, the slender trail ascends the final 200 metres (656 feet) to Uhuru Peak. Standing at 5,895 metres (19,340 feet), dawn breaks. A red half-moon rises over the ice fields of Mawenzi, and the mighty glaciers of Kilimanjaro are doused in a mercurial orange glow – a fitting welcome to the roof of Africa.

With no time to linger, hikers must begin their descent through spiderwebs of cloud and ice. After stopping briefly at Kibo Hut to refuel and rest, the trail wiggles quickly back down to Horombo, where a last mountain supper is enjoyed before an early night. The following day, hikers cover almost 20 kilometres (12 miles), winding through oxygen-rich moorland and lush jungle to the Mandara Huts, before tumbling out of Marangu Gate. After passing the finish line, summiteers are handed certificates as a parting gift. It is but a humble testament to those who dared to dream of ascending the heavens, up the mythical staircase of Kilimanjaro, to the roof of Africa.

The snowy peak towers over the plains below

SOUTH AFRICA

OTTER TRAIL

Venture to this coastal paradise bursting with luscious, green forests alive with wildlife

45km/28mi | 5 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 2,600m/8,530ft

As the oldest and most iconic walking trail in South Africa, the Otter Trail takes place along the stunning Garden Route coastline, and sits within the Tsitsikamma National Park. It's home to one of the most botanically diverse landscapes in the world – in fact, it's even more diverse than the Amazon rainforest in South America. From extraordinary gallery forests, gorgeous fynbos fields and the shy Cape clawless otters (to which the route owes its name), you'll be among incredible ecological diversity here, as well as plenty of wildlife: from dolphins playing in the bay, to sneaky genets, raucous baboons and monkeys, and graceful giant snails.

The journey begins at Storms River Mouth, where you'll be shown a safety video and given information from park rangers about the surrounding area. Short daily treks traversing the clifftops make up the trail, though moderate fitness is recommended for participants, as there are several uphill and downhill parts across the whole route.

Beginning in the forest, you'll follow yellow otter prints all the way as the trail takes you down towards the coast. The first stop is the stunning Jerling River Waterfall, which sits halfway between the start point

START POINT
STORMS RIVER MOUTH

END POINT
NATURE'S VALLEY

GETTING THERE
You can get a shuttle bus to the trail from the parks, from your car if you plan on driving, or from Port Elizabeth or other nearby towns if you don't drive.

WHEN TO TRAVEL
December to March will be the warmest months. May to September will be colder, but you can hike at any point of the year.

WHAT TO WEAR
Plan clothing around the season. If you're going in summer, take hiking shorts, T-shirts and a hat.

WHAT TO TAKE
A sleeping bag, food, cooking equipment, water treatment tablets, a head torch, a dry bag, a water bottle, a pocket knife, toiletries, mosquito repellant and sunscreen.

PIT STOPS
There are five huts on the trail, but both the start and finish points have bars and outside barbecue areas, too.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS
You can camp or stay in lodges at the start/end points. Along the trail there are huts at each stop that must be booked in advance.

USEFUL WEBSITES
www.sanparks.org/parks/garden_route/camps/storms_river/tourism/otter.php
www.stormsriver.com
www.tsitsikamma.info

and your first hut. It's the perfect place for a quick swim, as well as a photo opportunity and a picnic spot for lunch!

During the opening 4.8-kilometre (three-mile) trek towards the Ngubu Hut on your first day, you'll be towered over by magnificent, thousand-year-old yellowwood trees, as well as passing vast, multicoloured fynbos fields.

Taking the time to relax on your first night at the Ngubu Hut among Tsitsikamma's gallery forests, you might be able to spot playful dolphins out in the bay. Do take care of your dinner and leftovers though – as your induction might have warned, there are sneaky baboons and genets about!

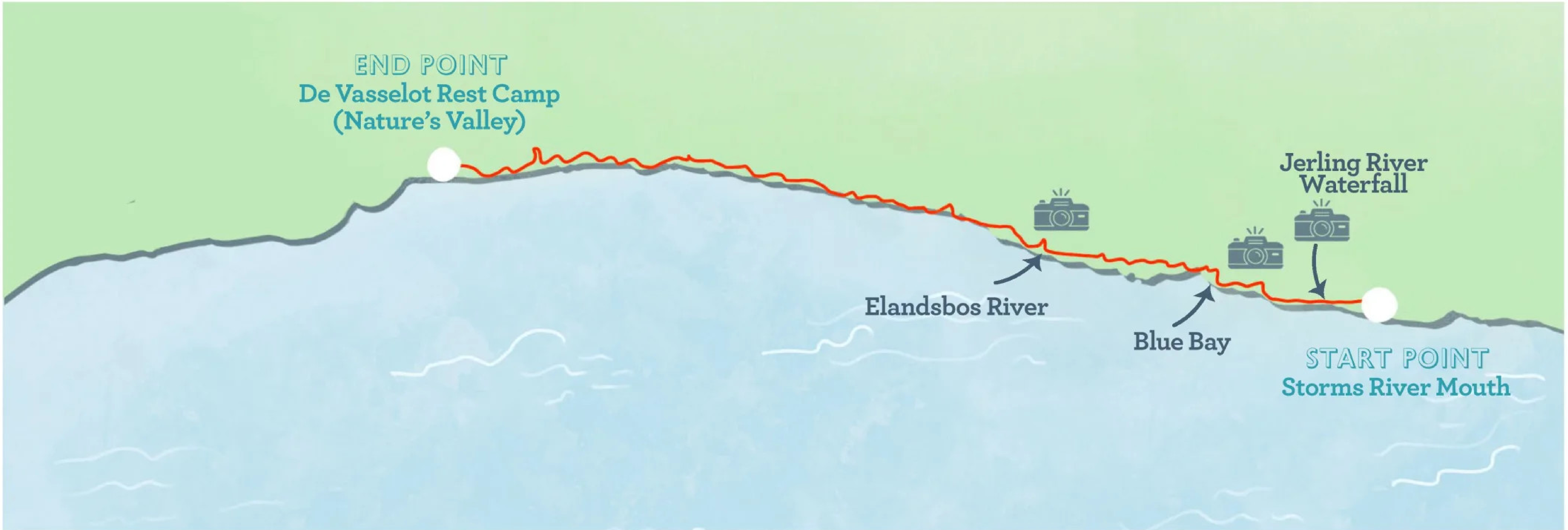
Rivers will start to emerge after your first night on the trail, and it's well worth planning around their low and high tides, as it can be dangerous if you catch them during the wrong time. The second day of the Otter Trail is a 7.9-kilometre (4.9-mile) hike, and includes a steep walk early on that takes you from the coast through magical forest tunnels as well as the quartz outcrop of Skilderkrans. You'll also head down towards Kleinbos River (which you should not drink from), and you can cross here safely providing you've arrived at low tide. A detour through to the Blue Bay after crossing will take you out towards a wooden lookout, which provides stunning views over the coastline. Heading back, you'll turn towards the sea and to your second hut, the Scott Hut on the Geelhoutbos River.

The third day is a 7.7-kilometre (4.8-mile) hike that will take you through the sandy banks of the Elandsbos River, with its distinctive coppery waters, and Lottering River (again you should avoid drinking water here). As you descend into Oakhurst Hut, take some time to look out for those elusive Cape clawless otters. Otherwise, you can enjoy spectacular layered cliffs and a sparkling azure coast right in front of you.

After an evening with some of the most idyllic views so far, the next day is a longer 13.8-kilometre (8.6-mile) route that will involve crossing Bloukrans River at low tide. Here, there are plenty of waterfalls along the way for lunch stops or a brief swim before reaching the penultimate stop on the trail for the evening: the Andre Hut.

From the lookout at Andre Hut, you'll be treated to jaw-dropping views. For the final 10.8-kilometre (6.7-mile) stretch, you'll follow the path along a beach before heading into a vast swathe of forest. Coming out of the other end, you'll finally reach De Vasselot Rest Camp, signalling the end of the Otter Trail and an unforgettable landscape.

A backdrop of beautiful blue ocean contrasts the luscious, green clifftops of the Otter Trail



© Getty Images ; Free Vector Maps | Words: Carrie Mok

The Lebanon Mountain Trail travels along the spine of Lebanon, through its most dramatic landscapes

LEBANON

LEBANON MOUNTAIN TRAIL

A cedar-drenched adventure through the ancient valleys, forests and monasteries of Lebanon

470km/292mi

27 days

Moderate

Point to Point

20,000m/65,617ft

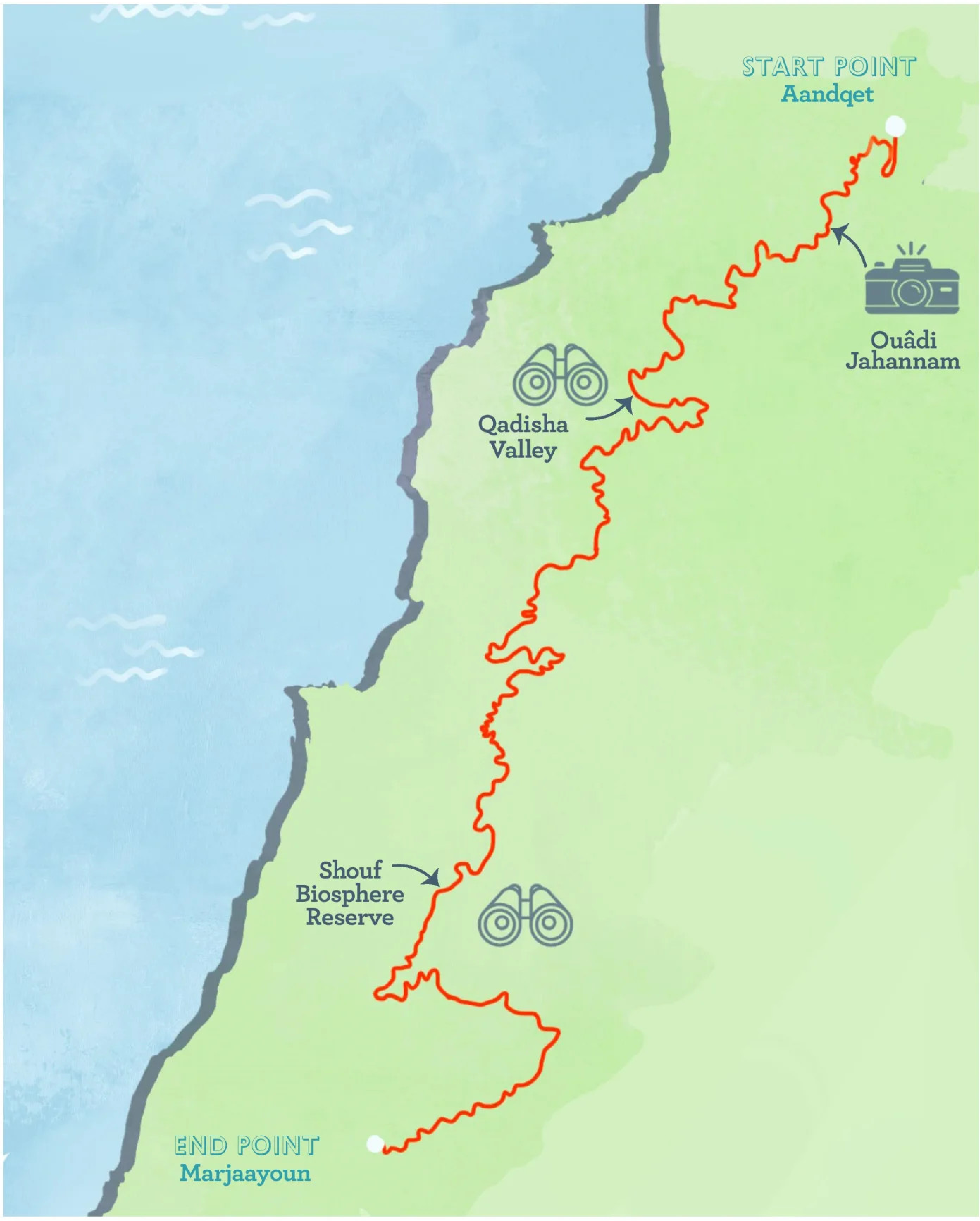
Straddling the Mediterranean Sea, the small nation of Lebanon teems with a striking array of natural and cultural wonders. Running 470 kilometres (292 miles) along the entire country is the Lebanon Mountain Trail – an epic month-long odyssey through the historical heart of early Christendom.

The journey begins at the village of Aandqet in the north of the country, amidst the apple orchards, crimson poppy-laced fields and mountain forests of the northern province of Akkar. The path slithers along a dirt road, following canals and streams into dense forests of pine and oak, past idyllic springs and stoic monasteries. Fruit orchards linger over red-roofed villages, disappearing back into forested hillsides, while long stretches of deserted track are broken by wandering shepherds.

Among the trail's most dramatic regions is Ouâdi Jahannam, the 'Valley of Hell'. Here, icy rivers flow into peaceful streams, glistening between the mighty valley walls. The rock rises abruptly, dropping into deep gorges, coated in layers of oak, juniper and pine, delivering daring ramblers to the village of Sfireh – named after the third-century Roman emperor Septimius Severus. Sfireh hosts the remains of the country's second-largest Roman temple complex, still bearing its Greek inscriptions.

As the trail intersects the Mount Lebanon range, it arrives at Qadisha Valley – the heart of a major pilgrimage route, running through the veins of early Christianity. While the Holy River Qadisha – immortalised in the scriptures – carves out the valley bed, chapels and hermitages are cut into the cedar-dressed rockface.

Towering 950 metres (3,117 feet) above sea level, surrounded by pine, oak and fruit trees, the Monastery of Saint Anthony of Qozhaya dates back to the fourth century. Despite enduring several rounds of looting and razing over the years, it hosts an 11th-century cooking pot and even a papal bull dating back to 1215.



START POINT
AANDQET

END POINT
MARJAAYOUN

GETTING THERE

From Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport, Aandqet is just a few hours' drive away.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

March to May for best weather, and to watch striking fauna sweep across the country.

WHAT TO WEAR

Loose and thin synthetic clothes, polar fleece jacket, thick socks, rain coat, sunglasses, gloves and a sun-protectant hat or visor.

WHAT TO TAKE

Compass, first-aid kit, torch, sharp knife, fire starter, sleeping bag and rubbish bags.

PIT STOPS

Sections are bookended by villages, where guesthouses and restaurants serve up delicious Lebanese fare.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

There are many affordable and sustainable guesthouses scattered across the trail, offering visitors an insight into local customs and cuisine.

USEFUL WEBSITES

lebanontrail.org
shoufcedar.org
visit-lebanon.org

Escaping persecution, seventh-century Syrian Maronites found solitude in the caves and hills of Qannoubin – developing a network of monasteries balancing eremitism with community spirit. They developed the monastery of Deir Qannoubin into a network of tunnels and caverns, adorned with frescoes and cave writings. From the 15th century, a veritable cliffside fortress, it served as the seat of the Maronite patriarch for 500 years, and continues to revel in quiet worship to this day. Many of the surrounding terraces are still maintained by local hermits and monks, living as their forefathers did.

To the east, riding atop Mount Makmel, lies the storied Horsh Arz El Rab, the 'Forest of the Cedars of God'. Rising some 2,050 metres (6,726 feet) high, the forest is among the few sites where Lebanon cedar still grows – a legendary tree once coveted for its use in building religious monuments, mentioned more than 100 times in the Bible. Meanwhile, in the village of Bcharre, a seventh-century monks' grotto that later became Kahlil Gibran's tomb, now serves as a museum devoted to the Lebanese writer.

Continuing across springs, hills and hamlets, the trail passes the rock inscriptions of Emperor Hadrian – forbidding citizens from cutting down juniper, oak, cedar and pine trees of Mount Lebanon. In keeping with this spirit, one of the trail's most magnificent stretches is the Shouf Biosphere Reserve, Lebanon's largest nature reserve. It features an ocean of cedar trees – the country's national symbol – all with arms stretched out wide. Comprising three forests, the reserve is home to a quarter of Lebanon's remaining cedar forest, as well as a striking variety of animals. Located at a crucial migratory point between Europe, Africa and Asia, visitors can spot more than 275 bird species, including the elusive eagle owl, chukar partridge and long-legged buzzard. They are joined by more than 30 mammals, such as the wolf, wild boar, wild cat, porcupine and striped hyena, and 31 reptile and amphibians – ranging from chameleons, tortoises and snakes to frogs, lizards and toads.

Nearby, Niha hosts the famous Cave of Tyron fortress, used by Crusaders and Mamluks alike to control the route to the Bekaa Valley – as well as Fakhreddine the Great, the Druze ruler of the Emirate of Shouf. High atop a craggy peak overlooking the village is the shrine of Nabi Ayoub – one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the Druze faith, said to have healing powers. Finally arriving at the southern village of Marjaayoun, the Lebanon Mountain Trail is a testament to the country's diverse, resilient and ever-beautiful spirit.

© Alamy; Free Vector Maps | Words: Joanne Al-Samarae

AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

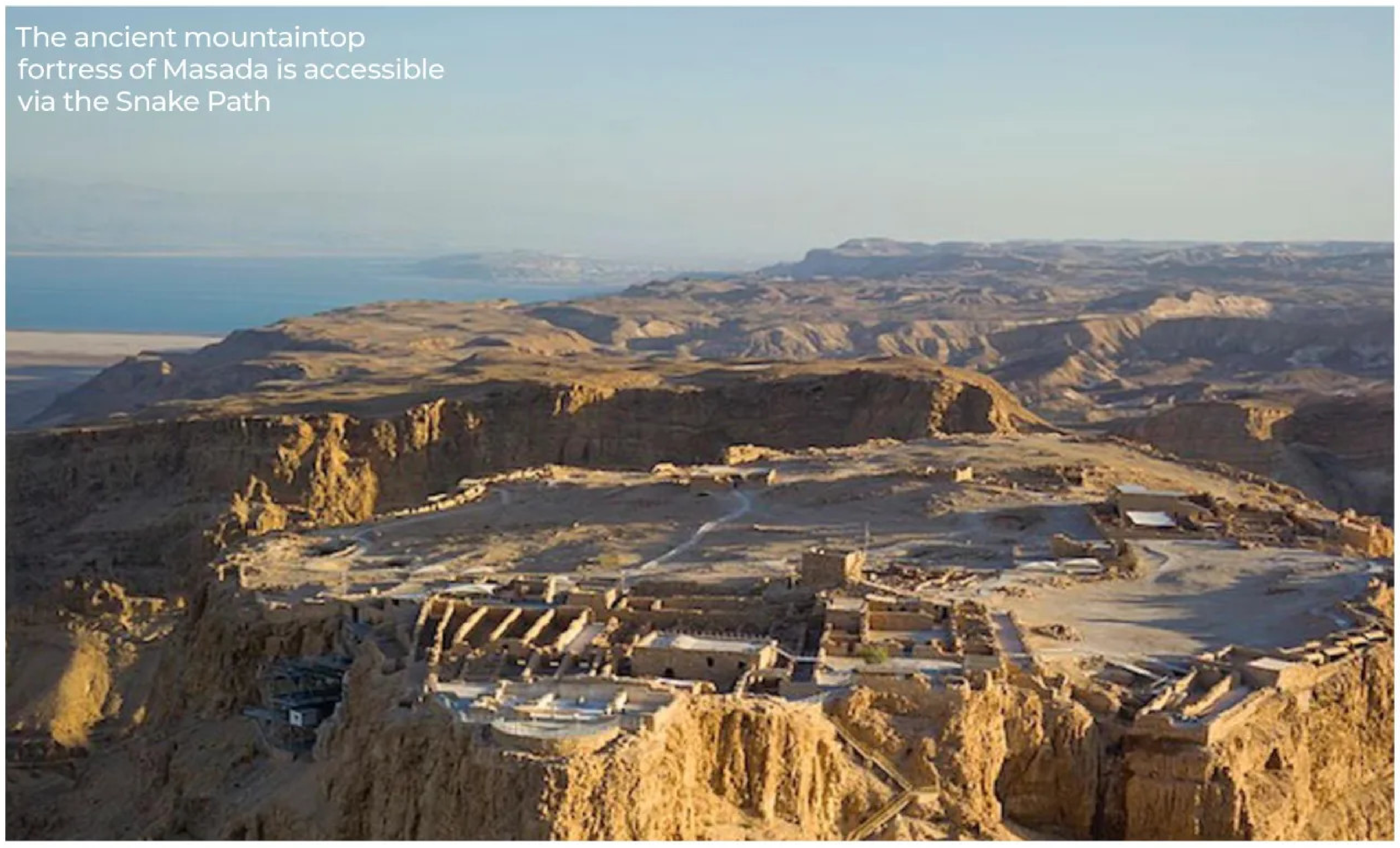
BEST OF THE REST

Desert, jungle, soaring mountaintops and shimmering waters make hiking in Africa and the Middle East an unforgettable experience

SNAKE PATH, MASADA

Israel

A rocky plateau rises from the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth, to 400m (1,312ft), where the ruins of Fortress Masada bear witness to a stirring chapter in the history of Israel, as its ancient defenders defied the Roman Empire, taking their own lives rather than submit. The steep, narrow, 5km (3.1mi) Snake Path leads to the summit. With brief rest stops, hikers complete the trek in less than 90 minutes, 45 up and 35 down. For many, the pilgrimage begins before dawn to view the spectacular sunrise. The eastern sky reddens, and light shimmers on the Dead Sea below. The majestic Moab Mountains in neighbouring Jordan come into view. The authorities close the Snake Path by 10am due to the heat, so arrive early and wear sunscreen in the summer. Masada is 15 minutes north of the Dead Sea resort town of Ein Bokek. Public transportation can be unreliable, so it's best to rent a car or hire a driver. The Masada admission fee is approximately £11 ($15) for adults.

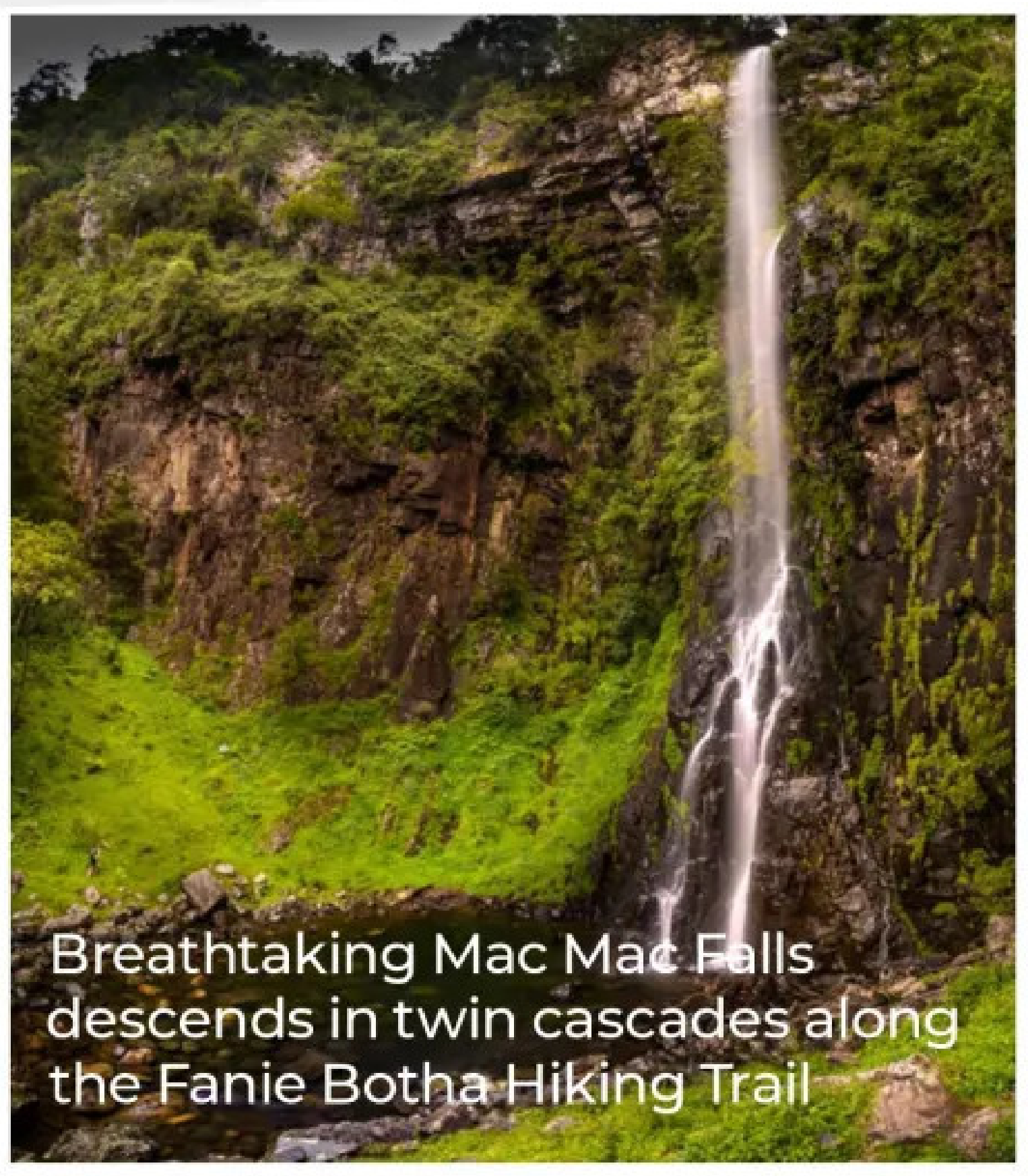

The ancient mountaintop fortress of Masada is accessible via the Snake Path

© Wiki/ Andrew Shiva

FANIE BOTHA HIKING TRAIL

Mpumalanga, South Africa

The 75km (47mi) Fanie Botha Hiking Trail requires moderate to advanced skills, as it winds along easy paths and steep climbs through South Africa's popular Mpumalanga province. While the entire trek takes five days to complete and summer heat is a concern, there are ample sights along the way, and time passes ever so swiftly. A variety of local wildlife, including many species of birds, accompany the hiker along the twisting trail, and two national monuments, the Mac Mac Falls and Lone Creek Falls, are fantastic lures for those who appreciate the wonders of nature. The twin Mac Mac Falls are 65m (213ft) high and named after Scottish miners from the 1883 Barberton Gold Rush. Along the Blyde River, the Lone Creek Falls cascade from a height of 70m (230ft) into a pool below. Bookings are available through numerous clubs and outdoors companies, and shorter hikes of two or three days are also available. Costs are approximately £5 ($6).

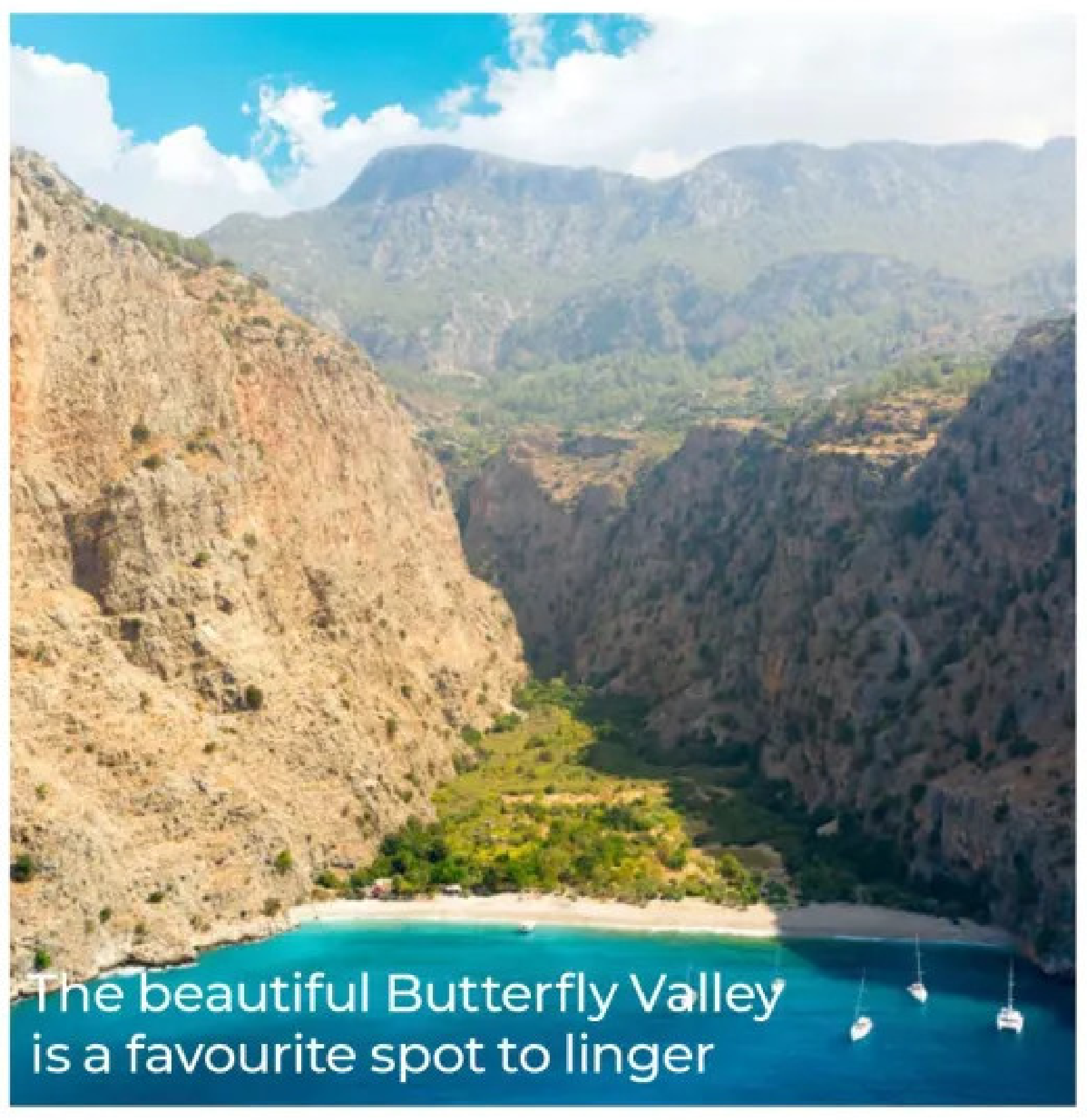

Breathtaking Mac Mac Falls descends in twin cascades along the Fanie Botha Hiking Trail

© Getty Images

LYCIAN WAY

Turkey

The Lycian Way is considered one of the finest long-distance hikes in the world, and those who have a month to spare while completing the 540km (336mi), 29-day trek consider it the adventure of a lifetime. From Fethiye to Antalya along the southern coast of Turkey, the Lycian Way invites accomplished hikers to marvel at the panoramic views of the Mediterranean Sea as the trail climbs higher along the rugged, mountainous coastline. Along the way, majestic cliffs overlook the sea, and olive groves dot the distant hills that lead to the Western Taurus Mountains, where ancient ruins of the Lycian League and the Roman Empire that followed hark back to an earlier era. Spring is the perfect time to hike the Lycian Way, but the route does get crowded. Home stays are available in numerous seaside villages along the route, and the cost of overnight stays, food, transportation and other expenses work out at around £1,457 ($1,700).


The beautiful Butterfly Valley is a favourite spot to linger

© Getty Images

The peak of Jebel Toubkal is a focal point of the Toubkal Circuit

© Wiki/ Kobersky

TOUBKAL CIRCUIT

Morocco

For thousands of years, the native Berber people of Morocco have walked the paths of the Atlas Mountains, and modern hikers who favour a multi-day experience have discovered the same fascination as the ancients with the 60km (37mi) Toubkal Circuit. The hike loops the base of Jebel Toubkal, the highest peak in North Africa, towering 4,167m (13,671ft) above the desert. The trail stretches past long ridgelines, valleys dotted by an occasional oasis, and deep mountain passes. Average duration for the moderately skilled hiker is four to six days, starting and ending in the village of Imlil, roughly a 90-minute ride from the fabled city of Marrakesh. Taxis may be booked for about £69 ($82). Most hikers choose a guided tour, and reasonably priced overnight accommodation may be found in local villages. Despite the heat and arid conditions, summer is peak season, although late spring and early autumn are ideal times to explore the Toubkal Circuit.

KARURA FOREST HIKE

Kenya

A few miles from bustling Nairobi, capital city of Kenya, the Karura Forest presents an outstanding family hiking opportunity. An easy trek may be preplanned among the 50km (31mi) of trails coursing through the forest and nearby marshland, leading to five rivers and spectacular waterfalls. Flora and fauna are abundant, from bright flowers to glittering ferns, and butterflies to reptiles. One popular trail begins along a dirt path and descends to the banks of the Karura River. Levelling off, the trail reaches the Mau Mau caves, named after the freedom fighters who discovered them during the uprising against the British in the 1950s. The Kenya Forest Service administers the entire area, and trails are well marked. Guided tours are available from Nairobi hotels with a cost of approximately £25 ($30).

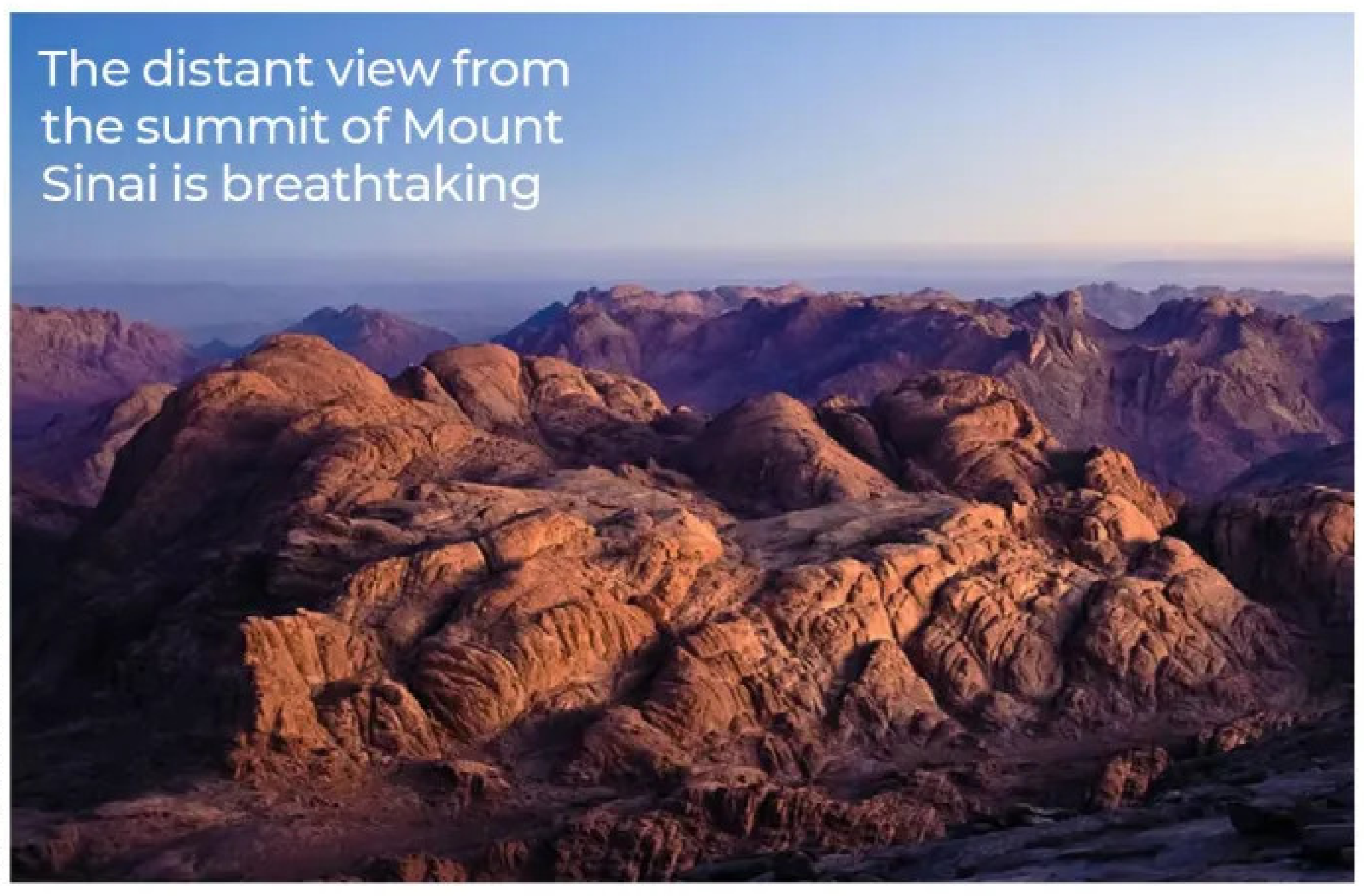
Marshlands dot the Karura Forest in the East African nation of Kenya

© Wiki/Ninaras

MOUNT SINAI

Sinai Peninsula, Egypt

Mount Sinai, sacred ground to the great religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, is also an unforgettable hiking experience for moderately skilled participants intent on encountering history and tradition while completing a single-day trek, perhaps in the ancient footsteps of Moses. Starting and ending at St Catherine's Monastery, the 7km (4.2mi) hike is the most popular loop of its kind in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. The average walking time is four to six hours, and the elevation rises from 1,586m (5,203ft) to 2,285m (7,457ft). Visitors to Mount Sinai usually secure overnight accommodation in Dahab or the resort town of Sharm el Sheikh, a two or three-hour drive from Sinai respectively. The hike is busy all year round, although predawn adventurers in winter will need to ensure they dress warmly.

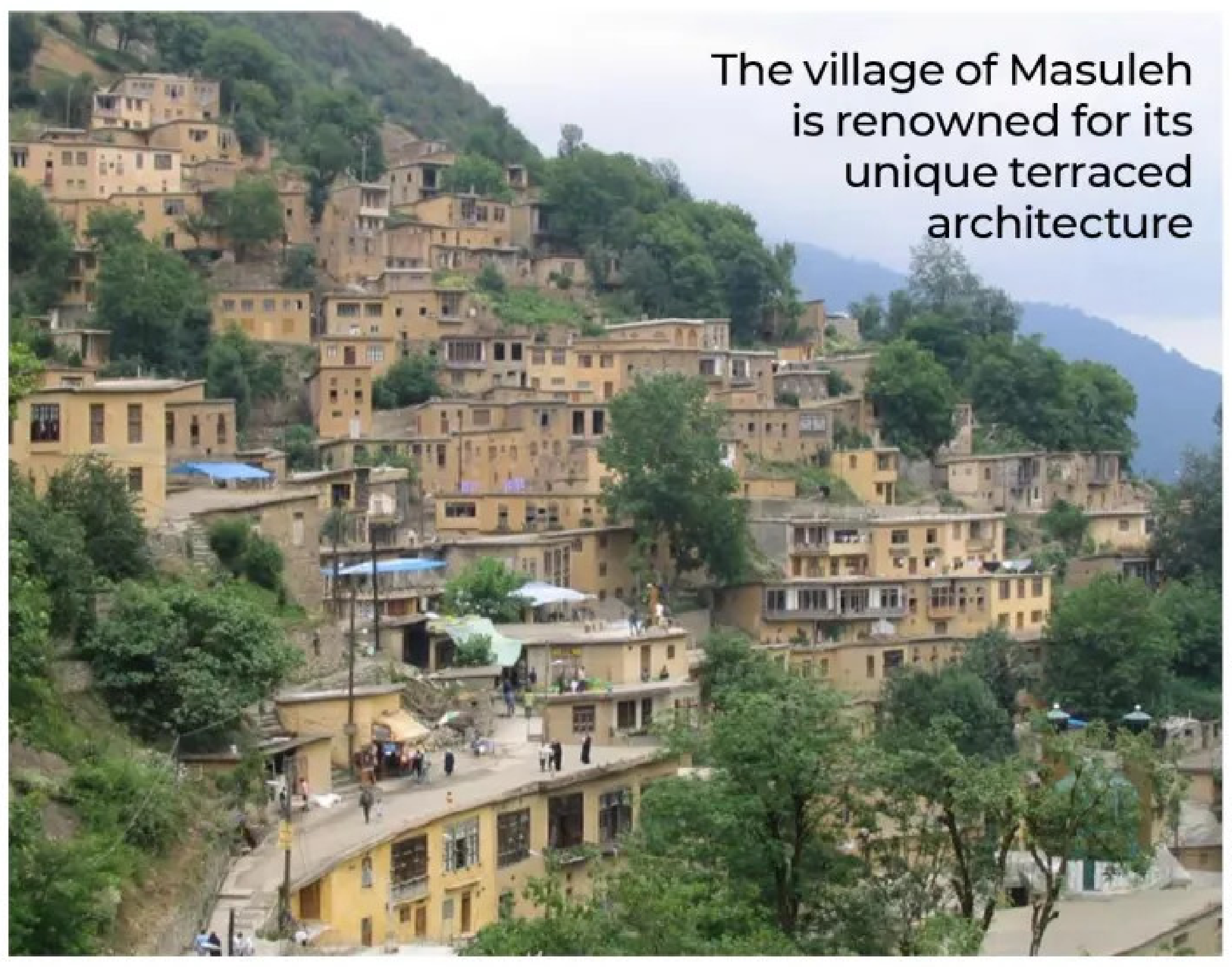


The distant view from the summit of Mount Sinai is breathtaking

© Wiki/Mohammed Moussa

MASULEH

Gilan Province, Iran



The village of Masuleh is renowned for its unique terraced architecture

© Wiki/Hoomanb

The Masuleh hike is named after the village where it begins and ends, just south of the Caspian Sea in Iran's Gilan Province. Dating back to the 10th century, Masuleh is well known for its architecture. The moderate, 25km (15.5mi) hike requires roughly seven hours. From the floor of the valley of Masuleh, it courses towards the Gasht Rodkan protected area. Passing farmhouses, streams and villages, hikers emerge at the valley rim to distant views of the countryside and the surrounding Alborz Mountains. Numerous side trails lead to individual peaks. Guides are available for hire, while two hotels and some residents offer accommodation. Motor vehicles are prohibited within the village, but buses to the city of Rasht run daily, connecting to Tehran, the Iranian capital.

Words: Mike Haskew

LOOK OUT FOR THESE SYMBOLS OVER THE FOLLOWING PAGES

DISTANCE

DURATION

DIFFICULTY

ROUTE TYPE

ELEVATION GAIN

PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

PLACE TO STAY

PLACE OF INTEREST

PLACE TO EAT

© Getty Images

ASIA

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EVEREST BASE CAMP, NEPAL

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ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT, NEPAL

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BEST OF THE REST

JAPAN

MOUNT FUJI'S YOSHIDA TRAIL

The highest point in a land rife with dramatic peaks, Fuji is so much more than just a mountain

18.7km/11.6mi 1-3 days Moderate Loop/Out & Back 1,471m/4,826ft

Mount Fuji last erupted in 1707, coating Tokyo in a thick layer of soot for two weeks

In the southeast of Yamanashi, a string of stone lanterns dance their way towards the 1,900-year-old shrine, Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen-jinja. Enveloped in 1,000-year-old cedars, during the Edo period, the site became the starting point of a pilgrimage up Mount Fuji, undertaken by members of the Fujiko folk faith to whom Fuji was a matter of spiritual significance. Every July, the Shinto shrine hosts a festival, opening the mountain and offering prayers to ensure safe passage for its hikers.

Today, visitors tend to forgo the first leg of the pilgrimage up the mountain's northern face, skipping past the forested historic route and shaving five hours off in the process. Instead, the journey begins at the rather less romantically named Fuji Subaru Line 5th Station. Already rising 2,300 metres (7,546 feet) above sea level, authorities generally recommend hikers take some time to acclimatise to the altitude before heading onwards. A quaint hub with a scattering of shops and restaurants, it's a brilliant place to stop for a spot to eat, soaking in stunning views of Fuji's Five Lakes below.

Straddling the border of Yamanashi and Shizuoka, the five crater lakes overlook the magnificent Mount Fuji – which last erupted in 1707, spewing enough ash to coat Tokyo in two centimetres (0.8 inches) of soot for two weeks. Come autumn, the surrounding leaves turn red and gold, lighting the landscape ablaze in fiery hues. Before heading up the mountain, particularly stunning views of the city of Fujiyoshida and Lake Yamanaka can be enjoyed from Komitake Shrine – built in the year 937 and named after one of the two historic mountains that formed Fuji.

While acclimatising, many like to explore the Ochudo Trail, or Middle Trail, that circles the mountain westwards from the 5th Station. This trail used to be a rite of passage, reserved exclusively for those who had scaled the mighty Fuji at least three times. Cutting through coniferous forest, dressed in moss and flowers, the hike unfolds across stunning views of the lakes, the Akaishi Mountains, Mount Yatsugatake and, on a clear day, as far as the Hida Mountains.

From the 5th Station, the main Yoshida trailhead itself slowly zig zags up the stark and barren Mount Fuji. Following in the footsteps of pilgrims, hikers drag themselves ever upwards towards the 7th Station. Along the way, many choose to stay in one of Fuji's mountain huts – simple lodgings, generally consisting of a blanket with a pillow, or a sleeping bag, in a communal space, or bunk-style dorm. For roughly £42 ($55), explorers can enjoy a good night's sleep and a hot meal. Otherwise, one is rarely far from a vending machine in Japan – even halfway up Mount Fuji. Of course, visitors are expected to behave respectfully by showing up promptly, speaking quietly and paying in cash.

Pressing on, as the journey extends between the 7th and 8th Stations it continues to wind up in an increasingly gruelling fashion. The trail rises from 2,700 metres (8,858 feet) to 3,100 metres (10,171 feet) in just over an hour and a half, growing steeper, climbing increasingly rocky ground. After the 8th Station, the trail merges with the Subashiri Trail, and the crowds thicken. Contrary to expectations, rather than spoil the hike, the mutual cheer among Fuji's climbers only adds to the journey.

Fog and clouds join the pilgrimage, wafting past like musket smoke across a war-torn Sengoku battlefield. However, just as the sweat begins to seep through clothes, the climb finally gives way to the coveted circular summit – towering 3,776 metres (12,388 feet) over the earth. The view is staggering, humbling and overwhelming. Below, a carpet of cloud stretches into the horizon, punctured by graceful holes, opening out to expose the magnificent landscape below. Suddenly, knees no longer buckle, as jaws drop, and forested mountains rise and fall into the five lakes. Tradition dictates visitors circle the crater before stopping by the country's highest post office to send a postcard. They can even enjoy a piping-hot ramen, a curry and a cold beer at the Yamaguchi-ya mountain hut.

On the way down, carefully following the yellow Yoshida markers, it is worth staying the night at an 8th Station mountain hut. After an evening spent counting the stars above and city lights below, Fuji boasts an unparalleled view of the sun emerging the next morning – the perfect send-home for a downward ramble back to the 5th Station.

Fuji's summit towers 3,776 metres (12,388 feet) over the earth

Built in 937, Komitake Shrine is named after one of the two historic mountains that formed Fuji

START POINT

FUJI SUBARU LINE 5TH STATION

END POINT

FUJI SUBARU LINE 5TH STATION

GETTING THERE

Fuji Subaru Line 5th Station can be reached by bus from Fujisan or Kawaguchiko train stations. Alternately, from July to mid-September, buses run from Shinjuku Expressway Bus Terminal.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

July to September, during official hiking season, for stable weather conditions.

WHAT TO WEAR

The weather can be very unpredictable, so pack a rain jacket and fleece, even if the sun is shining.

WHAT TO TAKE

Head torch for the early morning push to the summit.

PIT STOPS

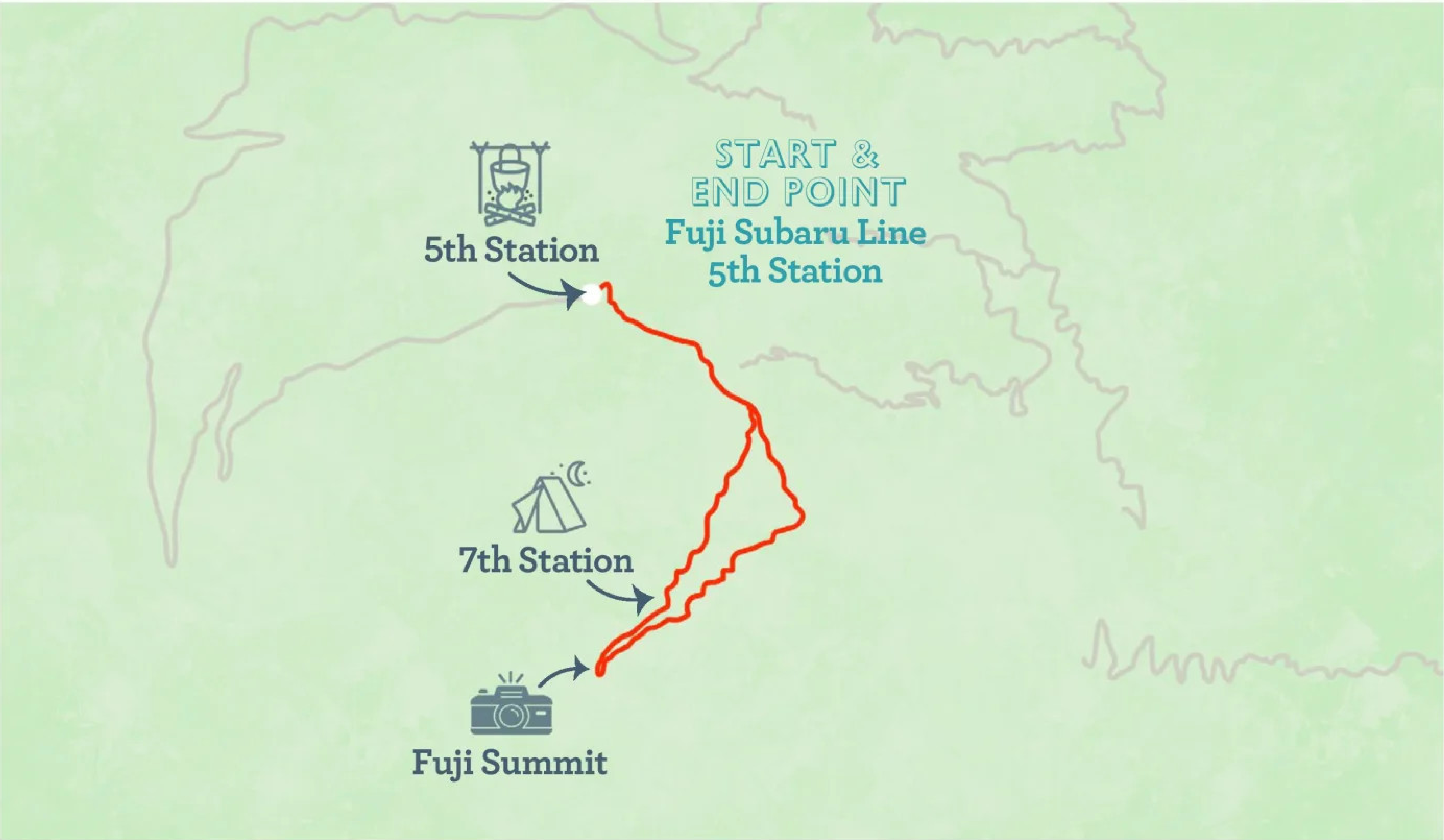
Refreshments and meals are available at the mountain huts and vending machines that dot the trail. Toilets are available for a small donation, so carry change.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Mountain huts offer a place to rest weary heads, but they are basic and often involve sleeping shoulder-to-shoulder with a stranger.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.fujisan-climb.jp/en
www.jnto.go.jp
www.fujimountainguides.com



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BHUTAN

SNOWMAN TREK

Take the hike of your life with the toughest trail in the world

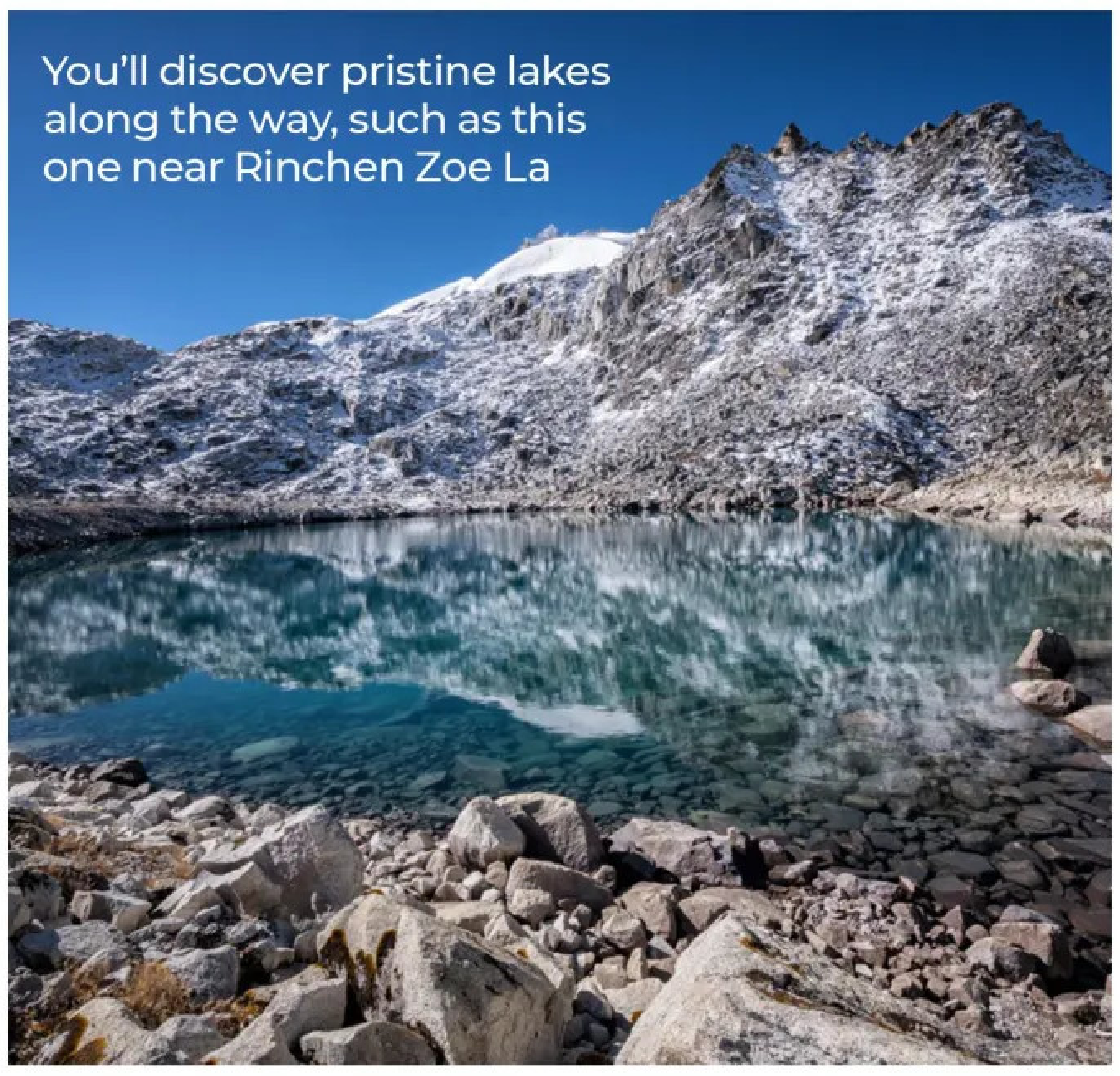
320km/200mi 25-30 days Difficult Point to Point 13,000m/42,650ft

Are you up for a challenge? Would you say you're in peak physical condition? Do you laugh in the face of altitude sickness? Then the Snowman Trek could be for you. Described as the hardest hiking trail in the world, this tremendous trek – crossing 11 mountain passes that are over 4,500 metres (14,760 feet) high, four of which are higher than 5,000 metres (16,400 feet) – will test your endurance, and then some. Its altitude, distance and duration have meant that many people who have embarked on the journey have been forced to turn back – the mountains simply haven't let them through. It is said that far more people have conquered Mount Everest than the Snowman Trek. But if you take on the expedition and succeed, my goodness, you're in for an experience of a lifetime.

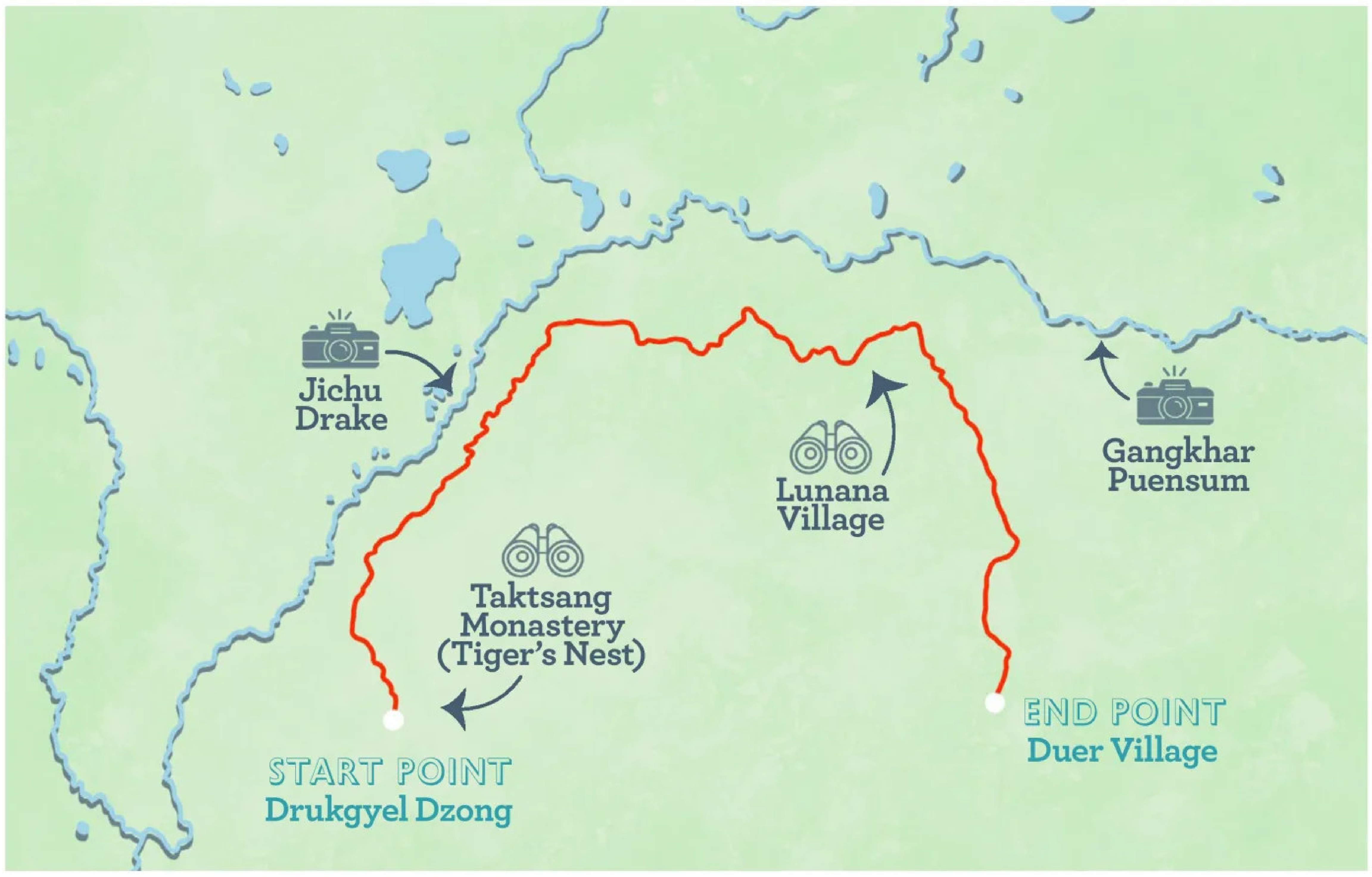
The crescent-shaped Snowman Trek runs through many regions in the northwest of Bhutan, including Thimphu, Paro, Gasa, Punakha and Wangdue, with a cumulative altitude gain of roughly 13,000 metres (42,650 feet) through rugged terrain overlooked by immense peaks. It meanders through an array of local yak herder camps and farming settlements, and follows paths with thousands of years of history; you'll walk where Mongol invaders, Tibetan refugees, tribespeople and pilgrims once did. The spectacular mountain views of Jomolhari, Jichu Drake, Masangang, Great Tiger Mountain and Gangkhar Puensum (the world's highest unclimbed mountain) may take your breath away more than the altitude. The trail also reaches Lunana Village, Bhutan's most inaccessible region and one of the most remote inhabited valleys in the world. No roads connect to it and the area is cut off from the rest of Bhutan for a third of the year by snow. The similarly isolated village of Thangsa is a seven-day hard walk to the nearest road.

As well as secluded villages, along the route you'll also be met with reminders of Buddhist culture and traditions. At Rinchen Zoe La, see the lengths of prayer flags flapping in the wind. Also discover Buddhist temples and monasteries, such as the beautiful Taktsang Monastery, known as Tiger's Nest, which clings to the rock towering some 900 metres (3,000 feet) above the Paro Valley. Legend has it that Guru Rinpoche, the ancient Buddhist spiritual master, flew to this location on the back of a tigress to meditate. Although you're unlikely to see a flying tiger on your trek, you may be lucky enough to spot a regular tiger, or even a snow leopard. Also

Prepare to camp in some extreme conditions, but it'll be worth it when you're greeted with views like this in the morning



You'll discover pristine lakes along the way, such as this one near Rinchen Zoe La



The imposing Gangchhenta, or Great Tiger Mountain, is 6,840m (22,440ft) tall

START POINT
DRUKGYEL DZONG

END POINT
DUER VILLAGE

GETTING THERE

Drukgyel Dzong is a 30-minute drive from Paro Airport. A vehicle will be arranged as part of a tour package (independent travel is restricted).

WHEN TO TRAVEL

September and October are the best months to hike this trail as it's likely there will be less rain.

WHAT TO WEAR

To be allowed access into the Buddhist temples and monasteries, pack clothes that cover your legs and shoulders.

WHAT TO TAKE

Trekking poles, eco-friendly detergent and a washing line to hoist between tents, plus an e-reader device (a book is too bulky) and a solar-powered charger.

PIT STOPS

Your guide will provide snacks and meals along the route.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

You'll be camping. Some tour guides offer luxury tents with mattresses and carpets.

USEFUL WEBSITES

trekking-in-bhutan.com/snowman-trek
bhutan.travel/activities/treks/snowman-trek-ii
himalayanexpeditions.com/wp/trips/snowman-trek

keep your eyes peeled for Himalayan black bears, yaks, Himalayan blue sheep, bearded vultures and Himalayan griffon vultures. Even if you don't see the creatures themselves, look out for their tracks underfoot.

The terrain and scenery is varied, diverse and oh-so-amazing. One section may be steep and rocky while the next is an established pilgrimage or village trail. Imposing white peaks dominate, while dense bamboo, cedar, blue pine, juniper and rhododendron forests make way for waterfalls, hot springs and glaciers. The wow-factor lakes, such as Oomta Lake, will stop you in your tracks. While the weather might not bring you to a halt, it may slow you down and test your stamina. Bhutan has a very long rainy season, so rain on the Snowman Trek is likely. The word Bhutan translates to 'land of the thunder dragon' because of the ferocious thunderstorms that occur. You might also have to contend with frost, and wade knee-deep through snow to get to where you're going. But the sun will likely shine, too, so pack for all weather.

It's not permitted to attempt the Snowman Trek solo, so make sure you do your research and choose a reputable local guide to take you. Not only will a good guide and their crew carve out your route, keep you safe, help carry your gear (you'll only have to lug your day pack), cook for you and set up camp every night, but they'll also regale you with Buddhist history, facts and tales to enrich your experience. Some may entertain you in the evening with traditional songs and dances, and even prepare a bedtime hot-water bottle on particularly chilly nights.

You'll descend into beautiful subalpine conifer forests en route to Thampoe Tsho valley

© Getty Images | Words: Katherine Bebo

CHINA

GREAT WALL OF CHINA

There's much to take away from a trip to the world's most famous wall

5km/3mi
4-6 hours
Moderate
Point to Point
300m/985ft

START POINT
JINSHANLING MAIN ENTRANCE
END POINT
JINSHANLING EAST ENTRANCE

GETTING THERE

Take a bus to Jinshanling Service Area from the Wangjing West Station in Beijing, located between Lines 13 and 15 of the subway.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

For the best views and to avoid the searing heat of summer, aim to go in the spring or autumn.

WHAT TO WEAR

Decent walking boots are still a must because of the uneven surfaces along the route, but you can complete the trail in a T-shirt and trousers.

WHAT TO TAKE

Some plasters and antiseptic wipes might be useful in case you cut yourself. Be sure to take a camera to capture those amazing views.

PIT STOPS

People sell refreshments on the wall, but it's worth taking your own to save money.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

This section of the wall is close to Beijing and can be completed as a day trip. The city has plenty of hotels and hostels to suit every budget.

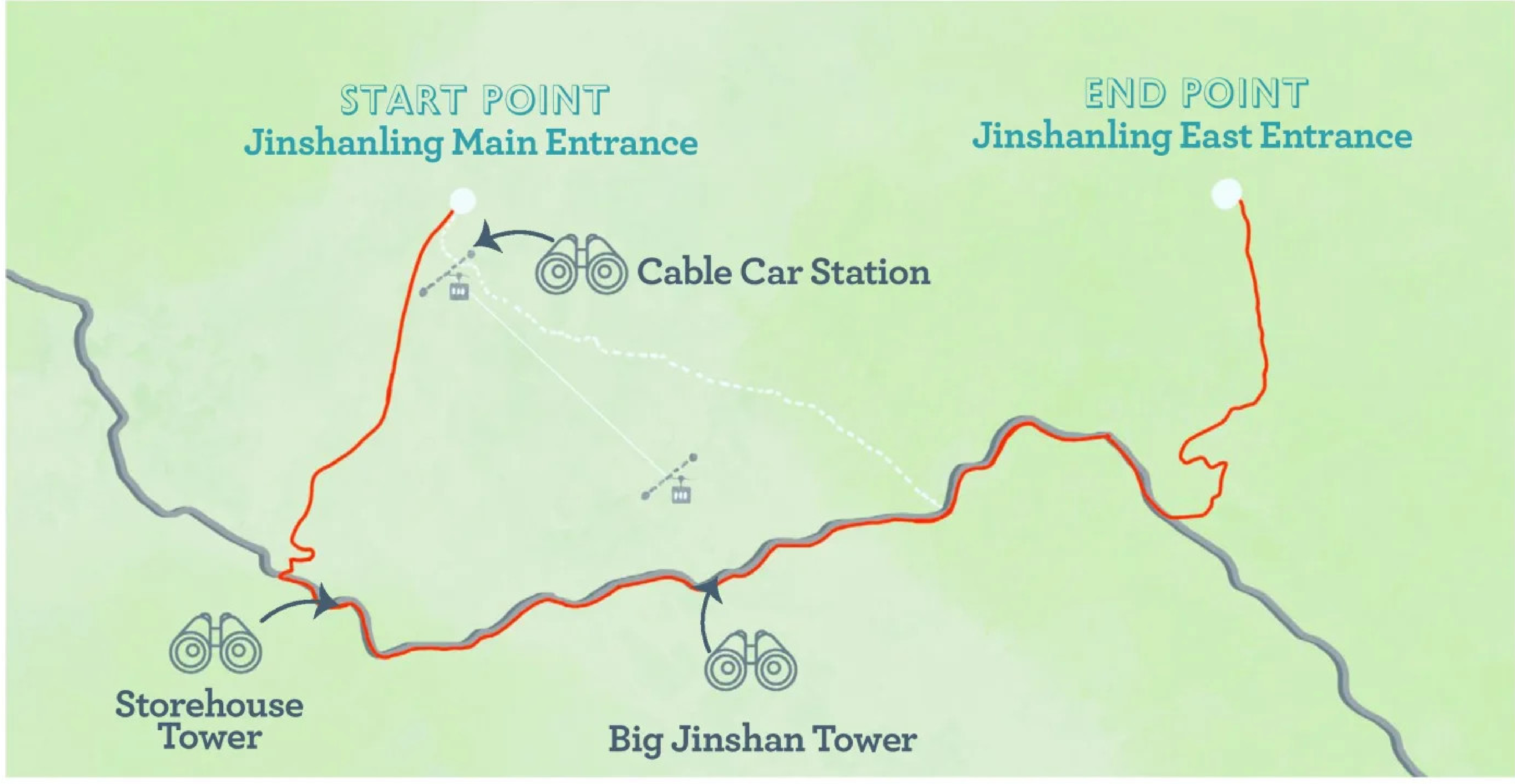
USEFUL WEBSITES

crawfordcreations.org/jinshanling-great-wall
chinahighlights.com/greatwall/hiking.htm
thechinaguide.com/destination/great-wall-of-china

Constructed from as early as the 7th century BC, the series of fortifications that make up the Great Wall of China have been calculated to stretch for more than 20,000 kilometres (12,430 miles). There are about 6,250 kilometres (3,900 miles) of actual wall in the northern part of the country, built during the Ming Dynasty. Some areas have fallen into a state of disrepair, but thanks to restoration projects, these are being repaired to prevent long-standing structures from falling apart. The route earmarked here, covering a large part of the Jinshanling section, has benefited from those efforts.

This particular hike is some five kilometres (three miles) in length. While that is just a tiny fraction of the entire wall, it can nevertheless take you the best part of a day to complete. You will be treated to stunning scenery as a reward for working your way up some very steep sections of wall. There's no getting around the fact that it's going to be tough on the knees at times, and the unrestored ground isn't always even by any stretch of the imagination. But this hike can take you away from hordes of tourists and allow you some relatively quiet contemplation, taking the hike at whatever pace you like.

Starting in Jinshanling about 130 kilometres (80 miles) northeast of Beijing, you'll begin from the main entrance with a short climb to Zhuanduokou Pass before making your way eastwards past regularly spaced watchtowers every 50 to 100 metres (164 to 328 feet) or so. This section has panoramic views, giving you a great excuse to take a breather and soak it all in. The path is well maintained here (for now, at least), although the abundance of steps will leave even the fittest of people panting.



The Jinshaling section of the Great Wall of China can get you away from the crowds

"THE ABUNDANCE OF STEPS WILL LEAVE EVEN THE FITTEST OF PEOPLE PANTING"

It is interesting to see the different types of watchtowers, some big, some small and some with distinct roofs. There's a mix of brick, stone and wood, plus plenty of opportunities to explore points of interest, including the impressive Storehouse Tower, split over two storeys where food, weapons and hay were kept. This section of the hike is also notable because you'll see barrier walls – secondary walls created with the purpose of allowing soldiers to protect themselves if required. There are also markings on the bricks, so keep a watch out for them: these were engraved by the makers of that part of the wall. Just don't go adding your own.

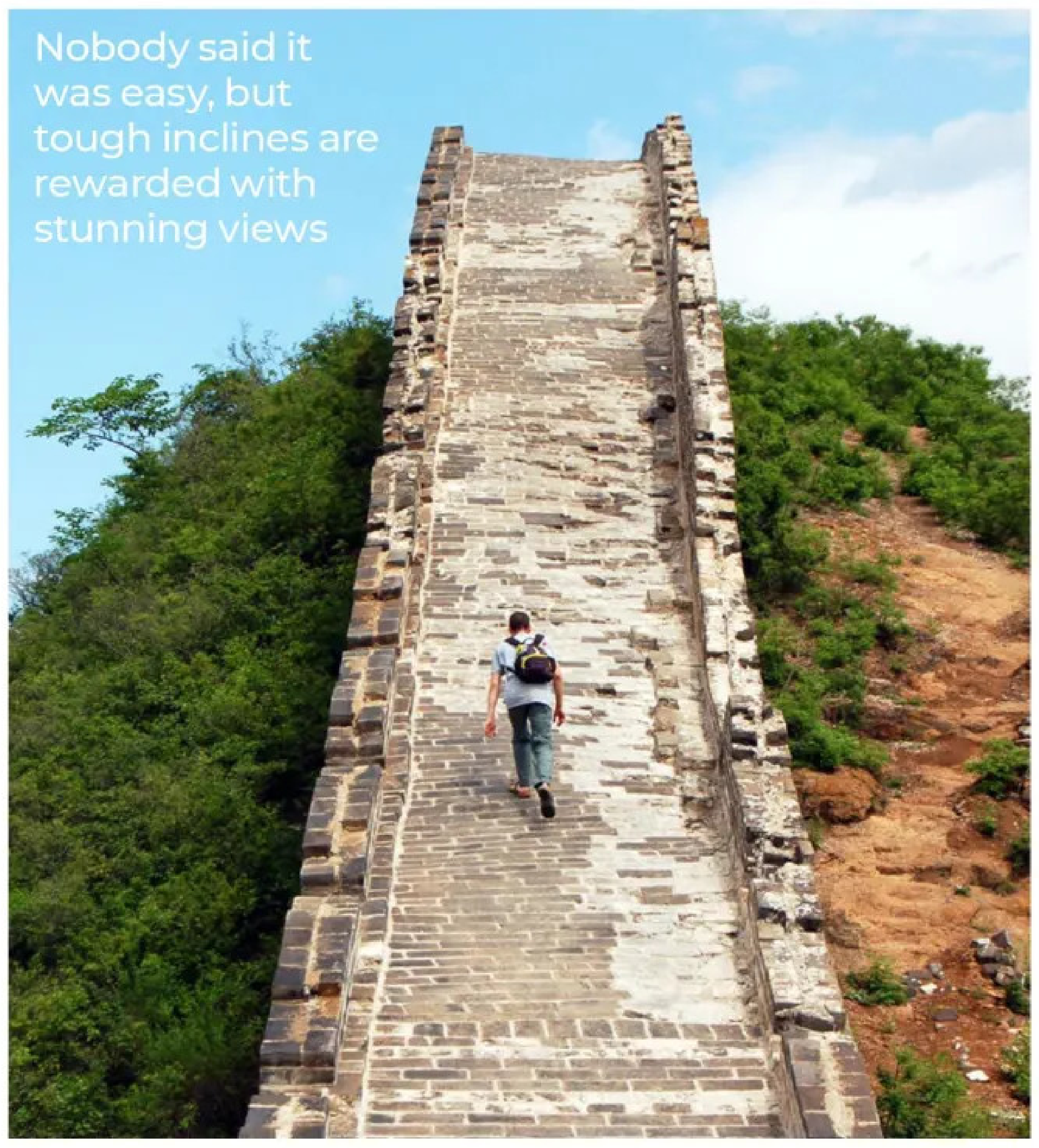
Further along, you'll come to the Small Jinshan Tower (from where you can take a cable car back down if you wish), closely followed by the Big Jinshan Tower, which has rafters and eaves created from polished bricks. Both have shooting holes and they contain storehouses. It's fun to try to find the gates to the Big Jinshan Tower, too, because they're not very easy to locate.

In many ways, the unrestored parts of the wall are perhaps the most interesting, and the difference between those and the parts that are still standing is rather stark. There are towers that lay in ruins, their outer walls having long crumbled, leaving them exposed and merely hinting at their once resplendent selves. But their original brickwork is testament to the craftsmanship of the Chinese workers, although the drops either side of the wall might become unnerving at times.

For those who like a challenge, there are parts of the hike that will both excite and instil dread. One particularly tough area feels like you're climbing a vertical wall, and you might even need to use your hands to get up to the top. But this is all part of the adventure – traversing a world wonder shouldn't really feel like a walk in the park!

Although the neighbouring Simatai section of the Great Wall can be visited via separate excursions, the direct route along the wall to Simatai West is currently closed due to repair work. Visitors have the option of leaving the wall at Houchuankou Pass to hike back to the main entrance. To perform the full route shown here, continue to East Five-Window Tower, where you can leave the wall and hike to the Jinshanling east entrance.

Parts of the wall require going up or down some very steep stairways



Nobody said it was easy, but tough inclines are rewarded with stunning views

© Getty Images | Words: David Crookes

INDONESIA

MOUNT RINJANI

Indonesia's holy matrimony of fire, stone and water

36km/22mi | 3 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 3,365m/11,040ft

Nestled between Bali and Sumbawa, the Indonesian island of Lombok hosts one of the country's highest peaks, the magnificent 3,726-metre-high (12,224-foot) Mount Rinjani. The most popular route for those hoping to conquer the active volcano, which last erupted in 2016, begins in the bustling village of Sembalun, surrounded by craggy cliffs. While some locals toil in the farms, many follow in the footsteps of their fathers, guiding curious visitors up Rinjani, which is considered to be a holy place to both the Sasak and Balinese communities.

At 1,100 metres (3,609 feet) above sea level, a battered trail rolls out of the village, unfolding into a mosaic of farmland, surrounded by verdant greenery. The scent of garlic dissipates into the wind, and the distant clanging of cowbells travels on the breeze, as herds of cattle linger past the grassland. As the trail rises upwards, stunning orchids nestle amongst the grasslands.

A brief respite can be enjoyed at the 1,300-metre-high (4,265-foot-high) Pos 1 Pemantauan, before pressing on to the 1,500-metre-high (4,921-foot-high) Pos 2 Tengengean, with glorious views of the canyon beyond. After a day toiling beneath the sun, the last stretch of the first leg of the journey is a challenging one. The gruelling hike winds its way ever-upwards, through forests of pine-like casuarinas, known locally as cemara. The orchids are replaced by delicate edelweiss, occasionally trampled by scurrying wild boar or boisterous long-tailed grey macaques, in search of snacks.

Part of the Pacific Rim of Fire, at 3,726m (12,224ft) Mount Rinjani is Indonesia's second-highest volcano

START POINT
SEMBALUN

END POINT
SENARU

GETTING THERE

Visitors can fly into Lombok International Airport, or take a ferry from Bali, and then drive three hours to Sembalun.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

April to November for the dry season.

WHAT TO WEAR

Light clothes for daytime hikes, as well as a light, water-resistant jacket and a warmer jacket for the night.

WHAT TO TAKE

While porters can carry essentials, hikers should bring a backpack, muscle balm, a torch or head torch, a sleeping bag, sunscreen, trekking poles, a swimsuit and a small towel.

PIT STOPS

Trekking companies will provide food and drink, and often even a toilet tent.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

There are two campsites at Crater Sembalun and Crater Senaru.

USEFUL WEBSITES

rudytrekker.com
rinjanidawnadventures.com
indonesia.travel

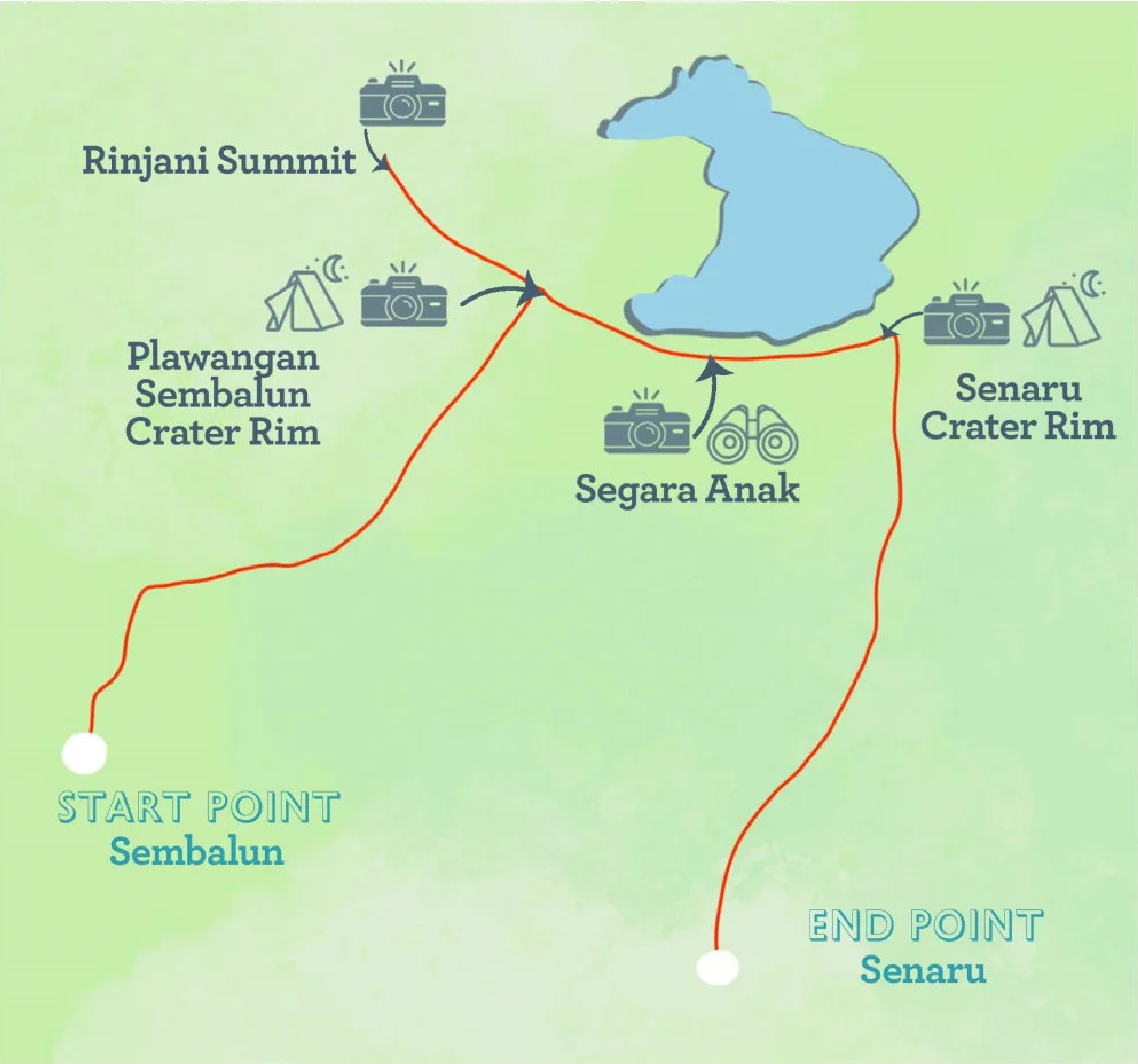
Placed fortuitously at 2,639 metres (8,658 feet), dressed in fog and cloud, a campsite overlooks the awe-inspiring Plawangan Sembalun Crater Rim – an otherworldly ring of mountains, with a striking lake within its bowels. While sunset is a wonder to behold, star-gazing is cut short by an early morning start – the second day of the odyssey is a crucial one. Over just three hours, the ascent rises by more than 1,000 metres (3,281 feet), to the 3,726-metre (12,224-foot) summit of Mount Rinjani itself. Indonesia's second-highest volcano, and a key player in the Pacific Ring of Fire, the volcano looms over a magnificent sunrise, as magma-like light spills over the crater below. Within, a newer volcano has sprouted – first dubbed Gunung Baru (New Mountain) then Barujari (Finger Mountain), it was from here that Rinjani erupted in 2016, leaving 200 tourists stranded. On a clear day, the views from the rim stretch all the way out to the Gili Islands, Bali and Mount Agung.

To both the local Muslim Sasak and Hindu Balinese people, Rinjani is considered a holy mountain, a symbolic centre of the world, connecting heaven and earth, and mortal with the divine. After soaking in the heavens, worshippers return from the summit, which burrows into the caldera. Having paid tribute to Batara Gunung, the God of the Mountain, they visit the crater lake – named Segara Anak, or Child of the Ocean, for its distinctive colour – to pay their respects to the Lake Goddess, Dewi Anjani; some even offering their jewellery to the watery depths.

At a nearby tree, visitors hang stones and make wishes – though they have to return to free the stones once their dreams come true. Some carry water to the top of the mountain, asking the gods to bless it, and hundreds of Hindus attend the annual Mulang Pekelem ceremony, where prayers and offerings are made for the safety and prosperity of the people. Another crucial part of the pilgrimage is the nearby hot springs, which are believed to have healing properties. Even the most secular visitors can enjoy a brief soak here before the adventure continues again, to the camp at Plawangan Senaru Crater Rim (2,641 metres (8,664 feet)).

The last stretch of the trail works its way downwards, through misty, moss-carpeted rainforest, where butterflies flutter past the kijang deer, whose dog-like barks echo across the forests. Large, white, sulphur-crested cockatoos shriek, while elsewhere the elusive palm civet awaits the cloak of night, and porcupines and leopard cats go about their business. Finally, the path unfurls all the way back down to 601 metres (1,972 feet), where the thatched roofs and generous hosts of the traditional Senaru village await.

Buried within the belly of Rinjani's crater is Gunung Barujari, which last erupted in 2016



Lake Segara Anak hosts the remarkable Mulang Pekelem ceremony every year

© Getty Images | Words: Joanne Al-Samarae

NEPAL

EVEREST BASE CAMP

Rugged, awe-inspiring and imposing, the journey to Earth's most magnificent mountain is like no other

130km/81mi

12-14 days

Moderate

Out & Back

2,783m/9,130ft

The highest mountain on earth, Everest stretches 8,849m (29,032ft) into the sky

Sun-faded prayer flags, spectacularly high mountain passes and rushing rapids – the journey to Everest Base Camp is more pilgrimage than hike. As the main route to the highest point on Earth, the trail has gained cult status in the world of trekking. Iconic and largely accessible, it propels travellers straight to the heart of the high-altitude Himalaya. Dubbed "the steps to heaven" by the Dalai Lama, the two-week journey traverses aromatic forests, glacial moraines and Sherpa hamlets to the greatest mountain known to man and the undeniable jewel in the Himalayan crown.

The journey to Everest begins with a stomach-churning flight from Kathmandu to Lukla – a notoriously dangerous 527-metre-long (1,729-foot) airstrip perched ambiguously atop a mountain ridge – where the classic 130-kilometre (81-mile) Everest Base Camp hike begins. Passing deep into Buddhist Sherpa country, the trail snakes downhill before slowly climbing to Phakding, through forests of blue pine and silver fir, past fiercely flowing rivers and docile lines of yaks. Cocooned by wooded valleys,

At the foot of Mount Everest, base camp sits at an altitude of 5,364m (17,598ft) from sea level

Ama Dablam is considered one of the most beautiful peaks in the world

START POINT
LUKLA

END POINT
LUKLA

GETTING THERE

Each day, 30-minute flights carry hikers from Kathmandu to Lukla aboard Twin Otters.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

February to May, for pre-monsoon season, or September to December for post-monsoon season.

WHAT TO WEAR

A neck gaiter will keep faces warm in the upper stretches, helping to prevent the dreaded Khumbu cough.

WHAT TO TAKE

Sleeping bags, hydration bladders, water purification tablets and head torches are all essential, while trekking poles and earplugs, for the flight to Lukla, are recommended.

PIT STOPS

Teahouses serve up food and drinks to hikers each day. Shops can be found at many of the villages, though Namche Bazaar has the widest selection.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Well-maintained teahouses can be found all the way to base camp.

USEFUL WEBSITES

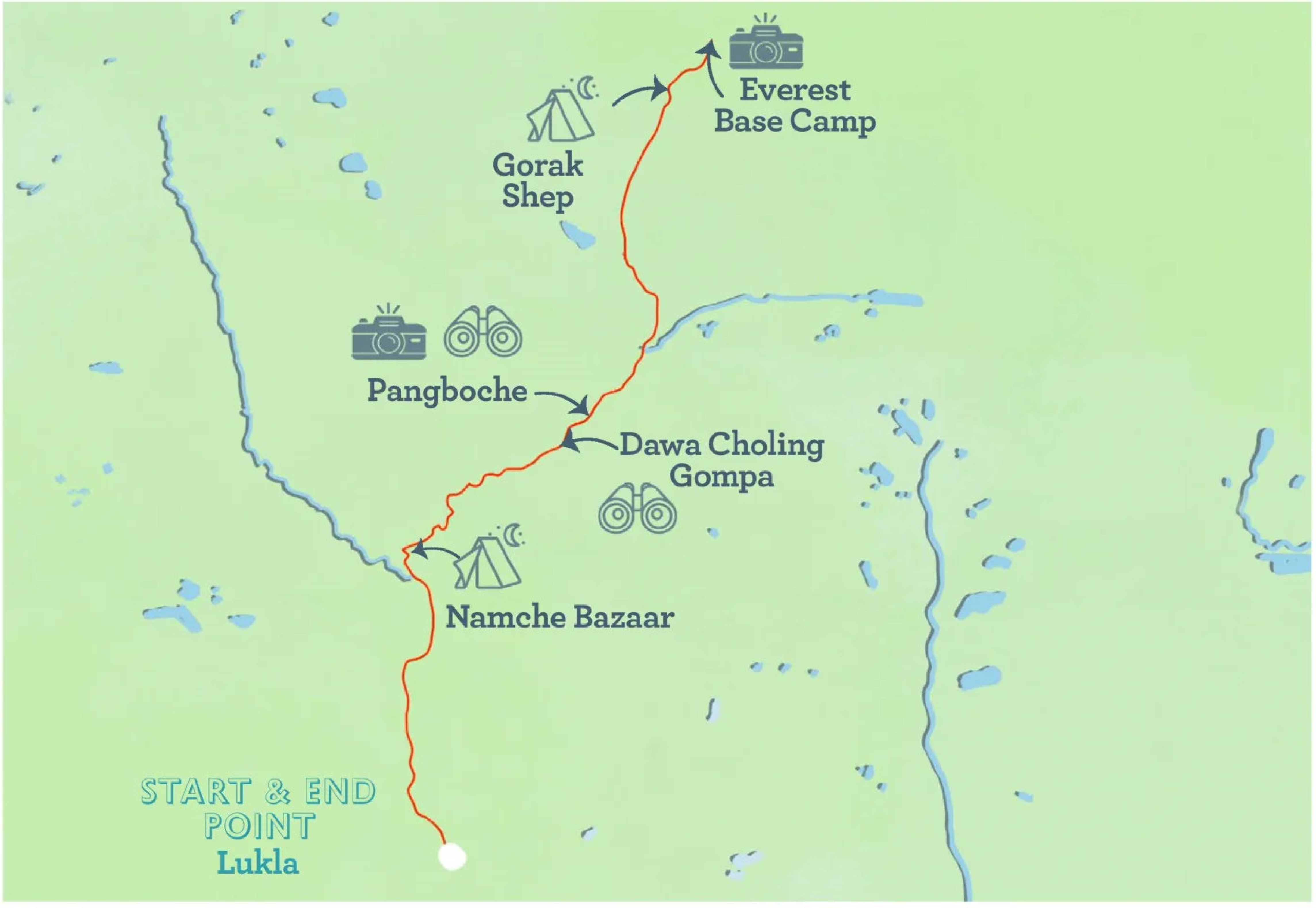
welcomenepal.com
www.snp.gov.np
www.3sistersadventuretrek.com

the village streets are aflutter with young children flying handmade kites.

From Phakding, the prayer wheel-lined trail hugs the milky-green Dudh Kosi river. As it rises, swaying rope bridges lead hikers across gurgling glacial streams before snaking uphill to Chumoa, where the climb intensifies. On clear days, after passing Monjo, lucky explorers are rewarded with their first glimpse of Everest, known as Sagarmatha in Nepali, or Chomolungma in Tibetan, meaning 'Mother Goddess of the World'. Eternally shy, her unmistakable black summit shoots up behind the sister peaks of Lhotse and Nuptse, piercing the vast Himalayan sky.

The trail pushes on, accompanied by the whistles of the Tibetan snowcock, to the horseshoe town of Namche Bazaar, the Sherpa capital. Nestled in a natural amphitheatre, 3,440 metres (11,286 feet) high, its collection of blue-tin roofs punctuate a tangled sea of trees. With hikers advised to remain here for two days to acclimatise, the bars, bakeries and second-hand book stores that fringe the cobbled,

> "THROUGH FORESTS OF BLUE PINE AND SILVER FIR, PAST FIERCELY FLOWING RIVERS"



© Getty Images, Alamy | Words: Joanne Al-Samarae

Buddhist Stupas, prayer wheels and mani stones dot the trail to base camp

serpentine streets are always brimming with a curious cast of characters. Every Saturday, the village bursts at the seams, as the colourful Saturday market draws hundreds more visitors.

A short walk from the village, the Sherwi Khangba Centre, run by local landscape photographer Lhakpa Sonam, houses the Sherpa Culture Museum, Mount Everest Documentation Centre and a photo gallery. Collectively, they hold an intriguing collection of cultural objects, photographs and press cuttings, dating all the way back to 1953, when Sherpa Tenzing Norgay made the first ever ascent of Everest alongside Sir Edmund Hillary. Away from the village, a number of day trips make ideal acclimatisation hikes, including the seven-hour trail to Thame village and its earthquake-damaged monastery. Alternatively, a challenging six-hour loop sweeps through the charmingly remote villages of Khunde and Khumjung.

Leaving Namche Bazaar behind, the main trail veers north, edging through crumpled valleys and thick rhododendron forests, before descending to the ever-present Dudh Kosi. Water-powered prayer wheels embossed with the mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum' line the river, believed to grant safe passage to all those who pass. Continuing northeast, hikers weave through juniper forests that have long been protected by local Tibetan priests, until the sky-grazing Ama Dablam comes into focus. One of the most exquisite peaks in the world, her razor-sharp ridges and towering ice-cliffs gracefully soar 6,828 metres (22,402 feet) heavenward.

After basking in her greatness, the village of Tengboche calls – home to one of the region's most beautiful monasteries, thanks to its otherworldly backdrop of the icing sugar-adorned Ama Dablam. Each year, the white-washed, azalea-fringed gompa plays host to the 19-day Mani Rimdu festival, where traditional masked dancers and Tibetan opera singers take centre stage to celebrate the founding of Buddhism.

Beyond Tengboche, the trail falls beneath canopies of birch to Debuche, before crossing the glacial Imja Khola river. From there, rhododendron-drenched valleys dotted with mani stones, engraved with Tibetan Buddhist mantras, stretch out to the horizon. Further north lies the village of Pangboche and its brightly-coloured monastery, the oldest in the Khumbu region, which also houses the supposed scalp of a yeti. Cutting through the tiny villages of Shomare and Orsho, the landscape transforms from thick carpets of green to a watercolour of grey and white as the trail rolls into wind-swept Pheriche. Sky-high, hovering at 4,371 metres (14,340 feet), talks about Acute Mountain Sickness are held here most afternoons, and hikers should spend at least 24 hours acclimatising.

> "SNOW-SPECKLED PEAKS AND DESOLATE ROCKY RIDGES ROLL OUT TO THE HORIZON"

The bustling village of Namche Bazaar is replete with shops, cafés and a lively market

While there are countless acclimatisation trails to explore, the one-hour climb to Nangkartshang gompa reveals panoramic views of the perfectly pyramidal Mount Makalu, the world's fifth-highest mountain, which straddles the border between Nepal and Tibet. For a longer challenge, the six-hour return hike up to the rocky peak of Chukhung climbs up to 4,730 metres (15,518 feet) and rewards with grandstand views of Imja Valley and Island Peak.

From Pheriche, the cairn-lined trail soars 400 metres (1,312 feet) to the quiet rumble of distant avalanches, interrupted only by the furious ringing of bells, signalling an approaching yak train. Punctuated by babbling streams and giant boulders, the elusive snow leopard calls this stretch home – though sightings of the majestic creature are rare. Arriving in Duglha, the air is thinner and acclimatisation is key, so local doctors strongly advise hikers spend the night here before continuing on.

From Duglha, snow-speckled peaks and desolate rocky ridges roll out to the horizon as the trail squeezes between twisting mounds of glacial moraine. Steadily rising, isolated stupas and sobering stone monuments to lost Sherpas pierce the mountainside all the way to Lobuche. After a night of acclimatisation, the trail makes for Gorak Shep. The busy stretch clings to the left side of the Khumbu Valley, navigating across loose scree, between origami-fold peaks. Progress here is slow due to a combination of ferocious winds, endless yak caravans and a 300-metre (984-foot) elevation gain.

From Gorak Shep, the last village before base camp, the uneven trail shoots towards the beating heart of the Himalaya. Gliding towards Everest, hikers are thrust across the thrilling Khumbu Glacier, before the circuit finally breaks into base camp and the world's tallest mountain comes within touching distance. While its peaks bathe in hundreds of shades of pink, half-cloaked by cloud, Everest's base is bejewelled with neon tents. Against a backdrop of Khumbu icefall, thousands of prayer flags flutter, and Everest's hallowed peaks beckon.

After standing at the feet of giants, the return journey begins. Gliding back down to Gorak Shep, in-the-know hikers hunker down for the night, ahead of an early morning detour. Departing from the main trail in the dark, a scree path snakes 442 metres (1,450 feet) up the south face of Kala Patthar. Summiting at sunrise, the tangerine sun rises directly behind Everest, bathing everything in a warm glow. At 5,643 metres (18,513 feet), this peak provides the most spectacular view of Everest anywhere on the trail, as well as the 8,516-metre-high (27,939-foot) Lhotse, Nuptse and the sugarloaf of Pumori, affectionally nicknamed 'daughter mountain'.

With the descent much easier than the ascent, the trail nudges quickly back down to Lobuche, where steaming cups of mint or ginger tea and heaving plates of cardamom-infused dhal bhat can be enjoyed. Retracing each step, the route winds down to Pheriche and then on to Namche Bazaar, before climbing back up to Lukla – exactly where the journey to Everest first began.

Dawa Choling Gompa, or Tengboche Monastery, hosts the annual Mani Rimdu festival

THE SCENIC ROUTE

Away from the classic Everest Base Camp trail, a number of side trips offer grandstand views and a renewed sense of adventure. Particularly scenic, the remote Gokyo Lakes trail climbs steeply up through the Dudh Koshi and Khumbu. Both challenging and steep, overnight stops at Phortse Thenga, Dole, Machhermo and Gokyo are advised to aid acclimatisation. Along the way, the slithering grey tongue of Ngozumpa Glacier, undoubtedly the region's most spectacular, makes an appearance, as does a string of six astonishingly blue sacred lakes. For unrivalled views, the hike up to Gokyo Ri culminates in an awe-inspiring, 360-degree panorama of the world's highest peaks, including 'eight-thousanders' Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and Cho Oyu – four of the world's only 14 mountains above 8,000 metres (26,247 feet).

Alternatively, the 20-day Three Passses Trek is considered the area's most difficult. The seriously high-altitude trail climbs into the granite and limestone mouths of the Cho-La, Kongma-La and Renjo-La passes – each standing more than 5,300 metres (17,388 feet) high. Those in search of a calmer pace should forgo the flight to Lukla in favour of the week-long switchback trail from Jiri. Following the footsteps of the 1953 British expedition, the picturesque hike threads through the stunning Solu Khumbu region, meandering through terraced farms, overgrown forests and traditional Sherpa villages.

The six Gokyo Lakes open up views of the 'eight-thousanders', Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and Cho Oyu

©Getty Images; Alamy

VIETNAM

SAPA VALLEY TRAIL

Unforgettable hill trekking among lush terraces, rice fields and wandering bison

8.5km/5.3mi | 4-5 hours | Moderate | Loop | 500m/1,640ft

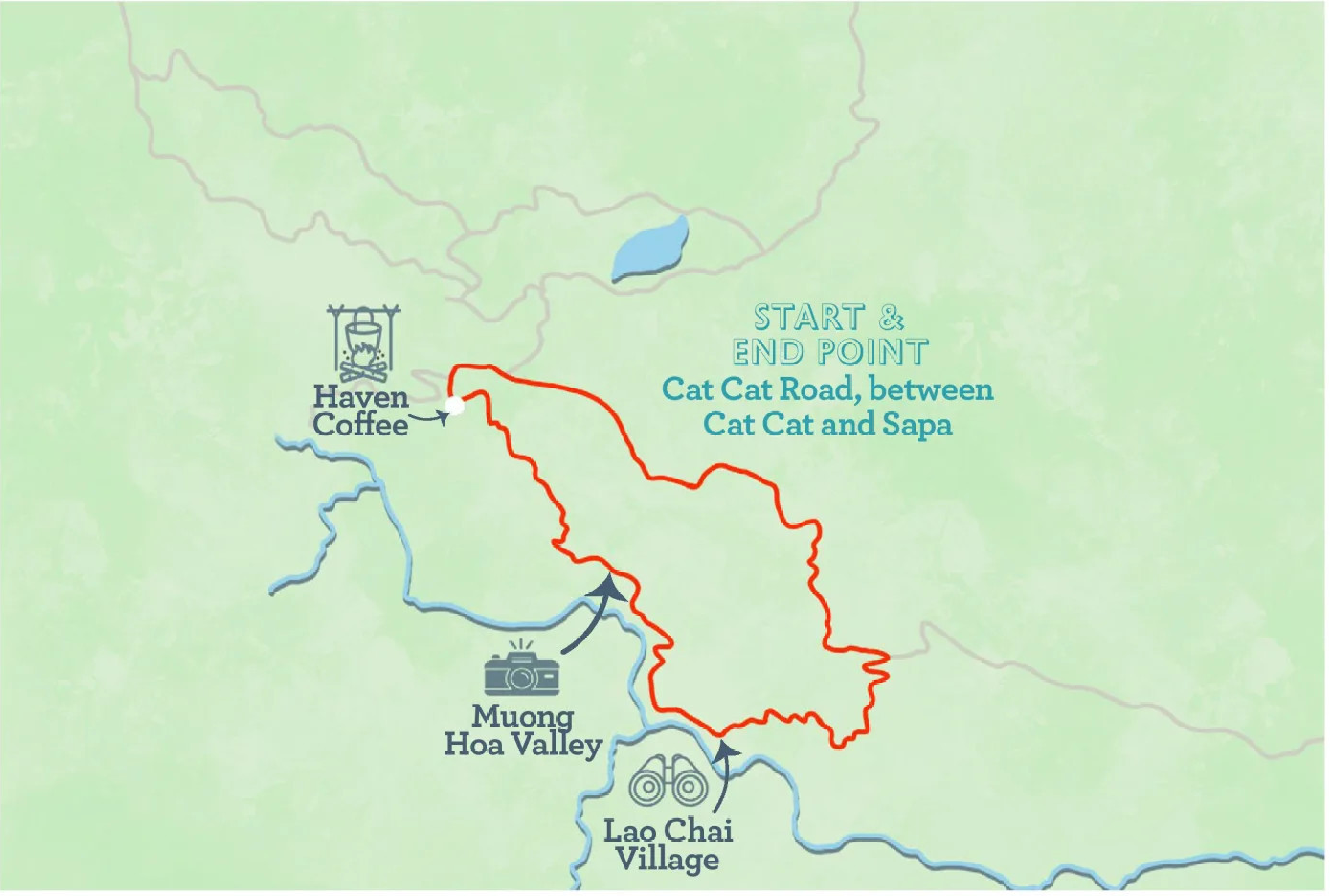
Terraced hills and green, lush landscapes, dotted with occasional villages. It's little wonder that Vietnam is one of the most popular hiking destinations in the world

There are many options for hikers in the hills in the far north of Vietnam. The area's main town is Sapa and it acts as a hub for hikers and tourists wanting to experience a tiny slice of the hill tribe way of life, and marvel at the phenomenal landscape around them.

Sapa is also the location for Vietnam's highest mountain, Mount Fansipan. Rising 3,147 metres (10,325 feet) above sea level, the temperature on the mountain is cool, if not cold, and it's often damp too. It's quite a change from the warm humidity of Hanoi when you step off the train in Lao Cai and climb the dizzying hairpins to Sapa.

From Sapa, you can set off in all directions and on all sorts of hikes. Here, we're focusing on a short 8.5-kilometre (5.3-mile) trail, which you can do unguided, but if you prefer you can do two- or three-day hikes with a local guide that allow you to see more and also stay overnight in wonderfully welcoming homestays. There are five main tribes in the hills surrounding Sapa – namely the Hmong, Yao, Zay, Tay and Xa Pho groups – and many of the trekking guides are women from these tribes who are working for responsible tourism projects where profits are ploughed back into secondary-school education for the tribal kids.

Back to our day hike, though. This hike begins in, or just outside, Cat Cat village, 2.4 kilometres (1.5 miles) west of Sapa. You can easily add on to this trail by walking from Cat Cat itself – you'll follow a mix of paved paths and steps to get to the village – and it's definitely worth having a look around before starting your hike. Some people see Cat Cat as picturesque and some people think it's a bit touristy. Either way, it's



Cat Cat village, just west of Sapa, where the trail begins

great for a quick scoot around. You have to pay a small fee on entering the village, but the money goes to the local families who open their houses for you to look around.

Cat Cat was established in the 19th century, when H'Mong and Dzao tribal families came here to grow rice and corn. Water is an important resource here – check out the impressive bamboo water wheels used to, among other things, pound the rice. Admire the waterfall, the dyed fabrics and handicrafts on sale in the shops, and then climb back up the steps to the start of the hike, at Haven Coffee shop.

The route heads south from Cat Cat, taking in the Muong Hoa Valley as it heads towards Y Linh Ho. This one of the biggest rice-producing areas in the region, and the evidence is plain to see in the breathtaking rice terraces on the rolling hills all around you. During the first portion of the hike, you'll walk alongside the river for a while. Here you might meet some people from the ethnic minority populations in the area – you can expect a warm welcome from them but, although they are used to seeing tourists, you should be culturally respectful as you pass through. Often, women and children from the villages will follow you, trying to encourage you to buy their handicrafts. The most persistent might even trail you for a few miles but don't worry, they don't wish you harm.

At many points during this hike, it can be difficult to be sure that you're on the right path. So, while it's only a short walk in terms of distance, the realities of the steep ups and downs, the uncertain turns and the likelihood that you'll have to double back on yourself once or twice, mean it might not be short in terms of time! In addition, the terrain is tricky, with narrow paths, stony and muddy ground underfoot, and a high risk of slipping. You'll often see female guides, who seem to have super-strength despite an often diminutive stature, hauling westerners out of sticky situations! If you get lost, just ask a local, and they'll point you in the right direction.

START POINT

CAT CAT ROAD, BETWEEN CAT CAT AND SAPA

END POINT

CAT CAT ROAD, BETWEEN CAT CAT AND SAPA

GETTING THERE

From Hanoi, take the overnight train to Lao Cai station, which is about 34 kilometres (21 miles) from Sapa. From there, it's easy to take a taxi or minibus up into the hills around Sapa.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

The best time to hike in Sapa is either from March to May or September to November. The temperature remains mild all year round but you should avoid rain in the months of July and August. The hike isn't advisable after heavy rainfall.

WHAT TO WEAR

Good, sturdy walking boots are best. The local guides wear wellies because it's often muddy and wet, but proper hiking boots are better. Clothing-wise, layers are essential as conditions vary with altitude and cloud cover.

WHAT TO TAKE

Snacks and water, and a waterproof shell to pack in a bag. Lots of camera battery power! Mosquito repellent is a must.

PIT STOPS

There are some rest stops en route and the meals are cheap, authentic and delicious. It's best to take plenty of bottled water with you. There are toilets in local cafés.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

There are plenty of places to stay in Sapa. Outside the town, in the villages, the homestays are a fantastic and authentic way to experience real hill-tribe life.

USEFUL WEBSITES

vietnam-guide.com
sapaochau.org
hanoisapatrain.com

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PAKISTAN

K2 BASE CAMP

Marvel at Mother Nature's boldest peak as you venture into her icy embrace

180km/112mi | 2-3 weeks | Difficult | Out & Back | 4,300m/14,110ft

While Everest is synonymous with the pinnacle of climbing, K2 is a different beast altogether; one that cannot be tamed. Nature's great pyramid, a megalith of ice and stone, the monster roars upwards from the Karakoram mountain range in the western reaches of Pakistan, soaring to a height of 8,611 metres (28,251 feet).

Although it is 238 metres (781 feet) shorter than its Himalayan counterpart, K2 is by far the more ferocious of the two. While more than 4,000 people have conquered Everest, fewer than 400 have summited K2, and one in four who attempt it are consumed by the mountain. While its icy pinnacle still draws elite mountaineers from across the globe, adventure-hungry ramblers can hike to its base camp, and admire Earth's most magnificent bulwark from afar.

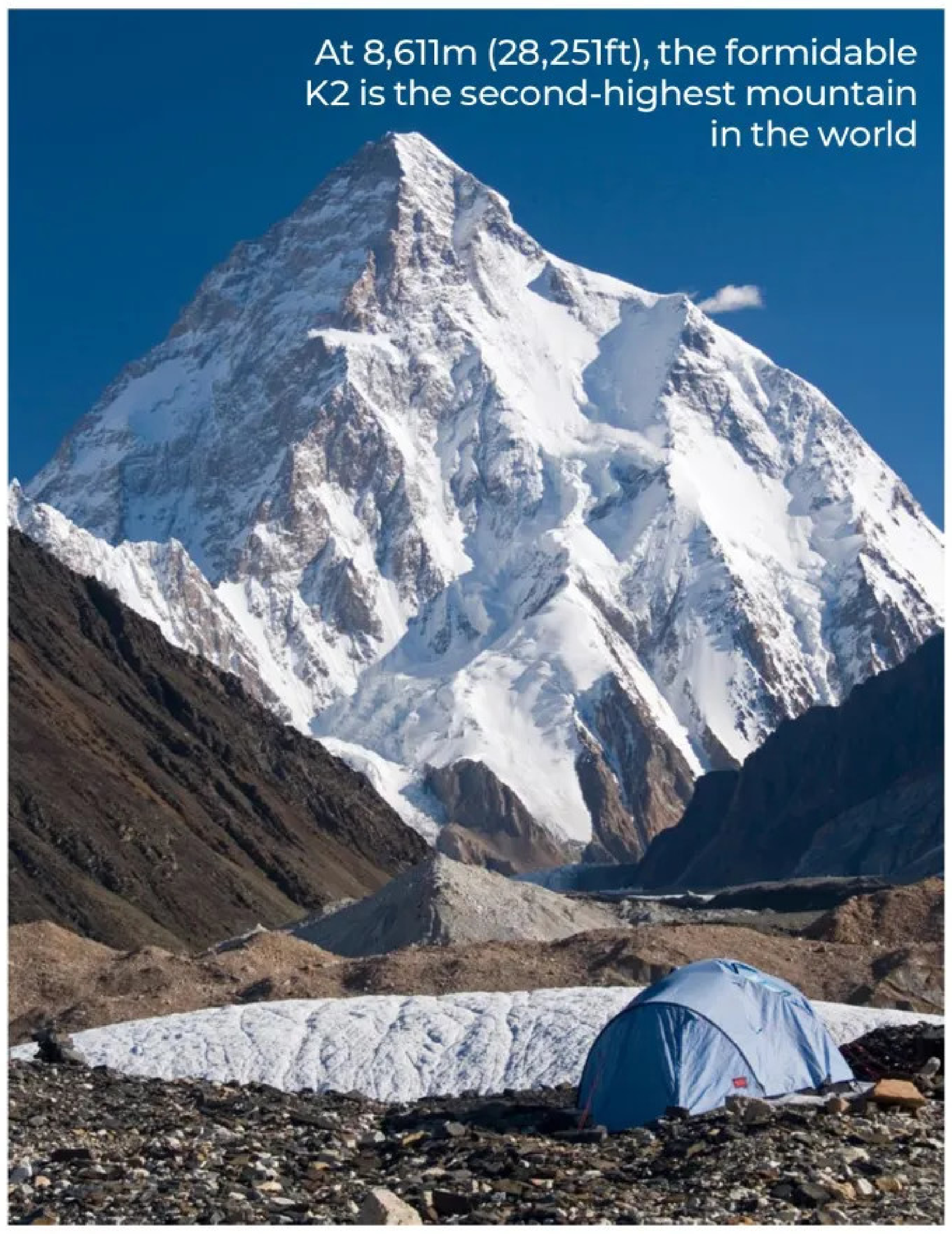
The journey begins amidst the stone-walled houses, poplars and hanging apricot trees of the frontier-feel village of Askole. From here, the fertile land rapidly falls away, flirting briefly with the magnificent 853-square-kilometre (329-square-mile) Biafo Glacier, before arriving at the riverside Jola Camp. Carefully meandering just over the floodplain, the precarious path trudges over a glacial stream, stopping once again at Paiju, where Balti porters and cooks sing and dance together around the campfire.

As wind hurtles dust in all directions, the gargantuan Baltoro Glacier reveals itself in all its icy glory, one of the longest non-polar glaciers at 63 kilometres (39 miles). The route continues over the glacier itself, sheathed in moraine, interspersed with enormous boulders, eventually veering into the right side of the valley. Soon, the stark landscape transforms, unfolding into grasslands filled with alpine meadow flowers, before once again returning to naked rock.

As the rising sun breathes fiery hues into the infinity of night, Khoburtse Camp looks out over the otherworldly Cathedral Towers, Uli Biaho and the Great Trango Tower. The ramble sallies forth over rock and glacial mounds, through the Duke of Abruzzi's terraced campsite (set up during the Italian royal explorer's expedition in 1909), interspersed by glorious views of Broad Peak, Baltoro Glacier and Cathedral Peak.

Adventurers glimpse the gargantuan 7,821-metre (25,659-foot) peak of Masherbrum – or K1 – and the 7,273-metre (23,862-foot) Muztagh Tower, before acclimatising themselves to the land of the giants. The ensuing stretch of the glacial journey passes a solemn set of porters' graves, where surviving peers stop to pray for their souls – a sincere reminder of the very real dangers that lie ahead.

The trail is seduced across ice dunes by the irresistible lure of Gasherbrum IV, looming 7,925 metres (26,001 feet) over the Baltoro, and overpowering three of its namesake sisters. Here, hikers are encircled by some of the world's most characterful, impermeable and awe-inspiring mountains – dubbed, by adventurer Galen Rowell, 'the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods'. At its heart, the Concordia Campsite, where the


At 8,611m (28,251ft), the formidable K2 is the second-highest mountain in the world

START POINT
ASKOLE

END POINT
ASKOLE

GETTING THERE

From Skardu, Askole can be reached via private four-wheel-drive. Regular domestic flights run between Skardu and Islamabad.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

July to August, for the best chance of snow-free passes.

WHAT TO WEAR

Warm layers, along with a waterproof jacket, overtrousers, bag and gloves for high altitudes.

WHAT TO TAKE

Tents are pitched on rock or ice, so it's essential to pack a thick camping mattress.

PIT STOPS

This route passes through some the most remote parts of Pakistan, so it's necessary to carry all provisions.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Camping is the only accommodation option, and sites are dotted along the trail.

USEFUL WEBSITES

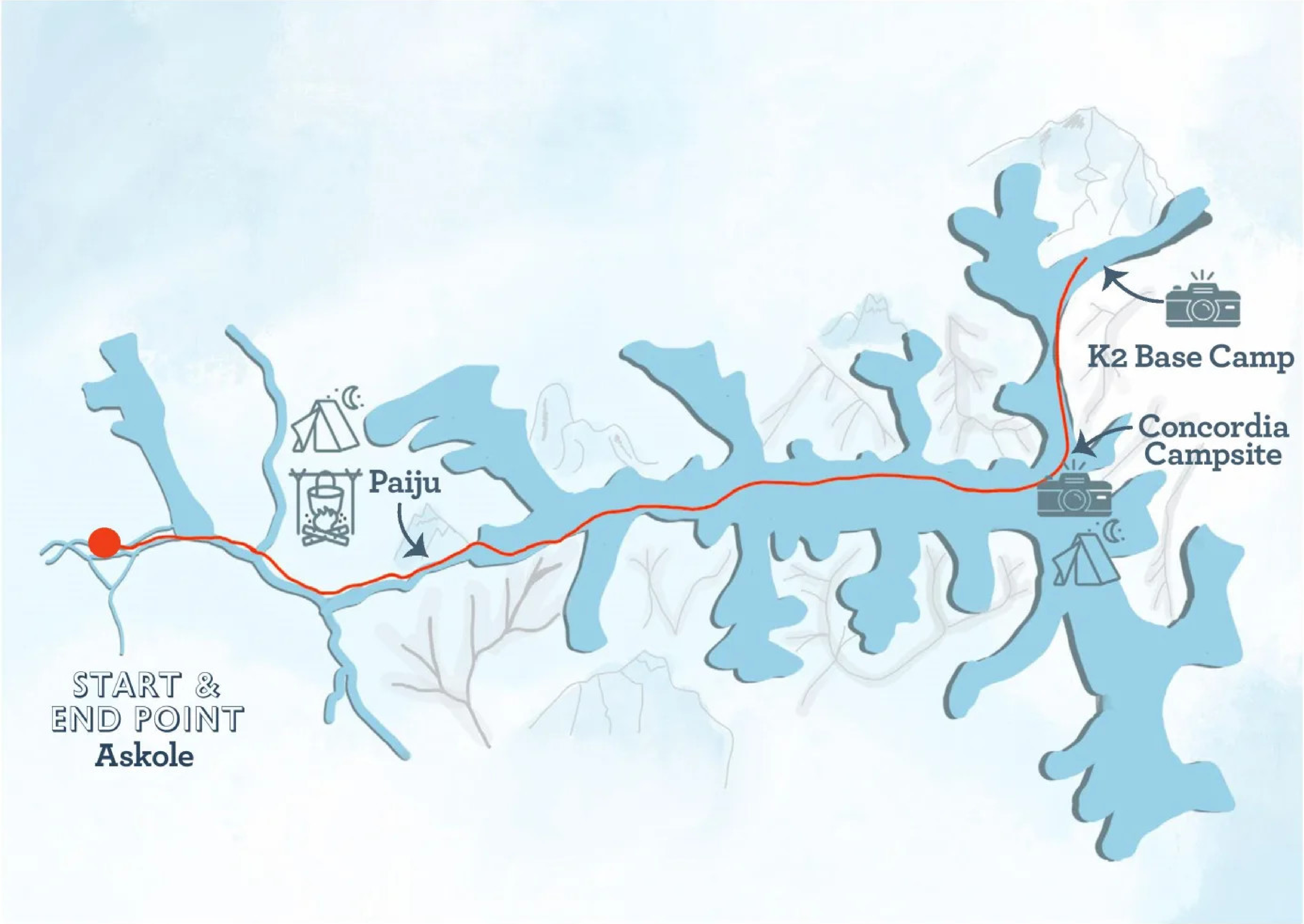
tourism.gov.pk
apricottours.pk
vepakistan.com

Upper Baltoro and Godwin-Austen glaciers meet, boasts perhaps one of the most remarkable views on Earth.

A natural amphitheatre, it sits in the shadow of the 8,035-metre (26,361-foot) Gasherbrum II, the unassailable 6,010-metre (19,718-foot) Mitre Peak, resembling a bishop's headdress, and Broad Peak, towering 8,051 metres (26,414 feet) over the Chinese border, to name a few. However, the true star of the show is K2, offering a teasing glimpse of her glory for the first time.

The route whirls its way through a maze of glacial moraines, winding its way past Broad Peak Base Camp. Finally, with the inflating K2 drawing ever-nearer, the route picks up the pace, throttling through cloud and mist, ice and snow, before finally pulling up to K2 Base Camp. Here, at a whopping 5,150 metres (16,896 feet), K2 seems to swallow the sky, heaving through a crackle of avalanches in the distance. Clouds are broken against its snowy crags and peaks, hurling chunks of ice and snow with it. As tents and flags flap in the wind, the magnitude of Mother Nature sinks in.

With heads emptied and hearts filled, exhausted hikers haul themselves back, passing back through Concordia, and so many familiar camps, looking over their shoulders all the while. By the time the trail returns to Paiju, though K2 has left a hole in the soul, it is soon filled once again by the laughter, songs and dances of the route's beloved porters – all united by a mutual adoration of the mighty K2.



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The Trango Towers reach like fingers into the sky, with the tallest spire reaching 6,286m (20,623ft)

The 6,010m (19,718ft) Mitre Peak is said to resemble a bishop's headdress

MALAYSIA

MOUNT KINABALU'S TIMPOHON TRAIL

The climb that is just as otherworldy as the summit's views

17km/10.5mi · 2 days · Moderate · Out & Back · 2,300m/7,546ft

Formed ten million years ago, Mount Kinabalu is the highest mountain in Malaysia

Like shards of broken glass, the majestic Mount Kinabalu erupts from Borneo's Sabah jungle. Rising 4,095 metres (13,435 feet) above sea level, its jagged crown of black granite peaks remains cloaked in both cloud and myth. Sacred to the indigenous Kadazan-Dusun people, the mountain is believed to be the resting place of the dead, before they journey on to the afterlife.

The highest mountain in Malaysia, and one of the tallest in Southeast Asia, the ten-million-year-old Kinabalu is protected within the bounds of Kinabalu National Park. A World Heritage Site, hikers travel from around the world to conquer Kinabalu's bare rock summit, but only 135 passes are available each day.

The journey from Kinabalu's toe to tip passes through mist-shrouded rainforest and ancient grasslands, ambling through alpine meadows and desolate rocky moonscapes. Carpeted in exotic flora and fauna, the trail to the summit is more than just a physical challenge – it's a powerful lesson in botanical and biological richness and diversity. More than 5,000 species of plant are found on Mount Kinabalu, more than all of Europe combined, and many of these have found fertile ground in the mountain's lower reaches.

After entering Kinabalu National Park, the wooden Timpohon Gate sets hikers on the right path. Clambering through forests of

oak and chestnut trees, via a series of steps carved out of dirt, the trail begins to rise. While moss and bamboo cover the slopes, it's the exotic Nepenthes pitcher plants that set hearts racing. Of Kinabalu's 13 species, five are found nowhere else on Earth – including the carnivorous Nepenthes rajah. Growing up to 40 centimetres (16 inches) tall and 20 centimetres (eight inches) wide, it traps and digests reptiles, small mammals and even birds in its urn-shaped mouth. Not to be outdone, the elusive Rafflesia plant is the largest flower in the world and can grow up to a metre (39 inches) in diameter.

Nudging deeper into the jungle, the humidity rises as the trail passes the pretty Carson Waterfall, following ancient trails used by the locals. Dipping and diving over logs, the route winds its way through the seemingly impenetrable forest, which rings with birdsong. More than 320 bird species nest on Mount Kinabalu, including the intriguingly named rhinoceros hornbill, mountain serpent-eagle, eyebrowed jungle flycatcher, bare-headed laughingthrush and Dulit frogmouth. Underfoot, the trail steepens, and lucky climbers will spot orangutans swinging confidently between branches, their long, elegant fingers grasping the vines.

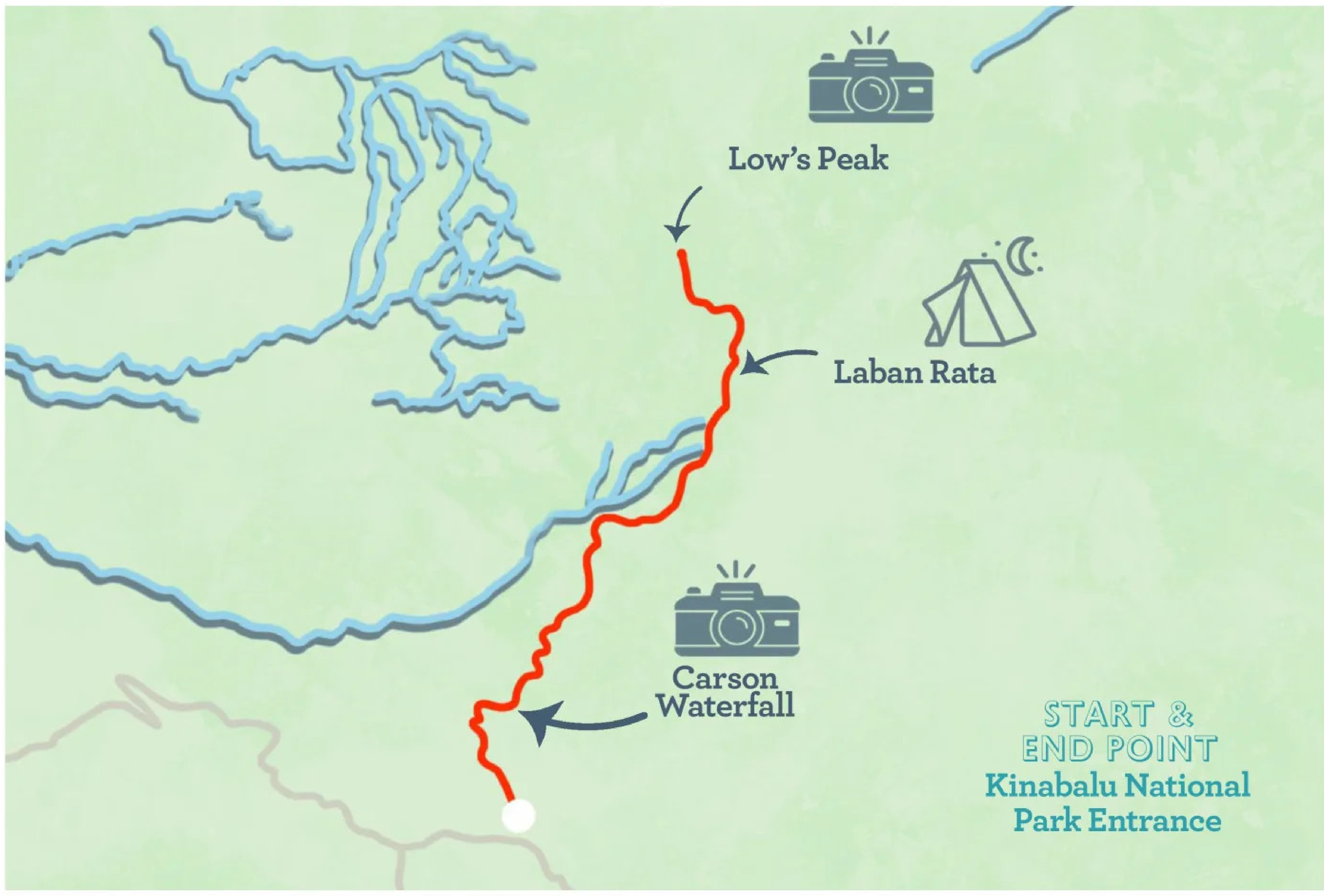
Finally, hikers break through the forest canopy, and the vibrant blue sky – punctuated with candy-floss clouds – opens. The crumpled, rocky plateau is dusted with dwarfed shrubs, lichens and liverworts, as well as 600 species of fern. Following a steep scramble, the whitewashed Laban Rata Resthouse emerges on the horizon. After a hearty dinner, a light show courtesy of Mother Nature sets the sky ablaze with fiery reds and pinks.

Under a heaving black sky, the final push to Low's Peak, Kinabalu's highest point, begins. Long sections of steep, wooden steps cause constant bottlenecks, until hikers begin to slow the pace and move in unison – slithering single file up the mountainside. Then, steps give way to gigantic, smooth, granite slabs, laced with guide ropes. Wiggling between Ugly Sister and St John's Peak, the trail gains altitude, the wind picks up and temperatures drop below freezing.

Propelling across Kinabalu's near-sheer face, the final kilometre crawls between jagged rock and slippery granite. Coming over Low's Peak, the morning sun finally breaks from below the horizon. Awash with light, the craggy, tectonic peaks of Kinabalu's crown rise like a stegosaurus's back – barren granite teeth that have been shaped by wind and water over many thousands of years.

With the cloak of darkness lifted, the descent reveals stunning views of Mount Kinabalu National Park spreading out below. Amidst twisted spires and bottomless gullies, more than 800 orchid species defiantly rise and thrive, including the undeniably beautiful Paphiopedilum slipper orchid.

For thrill-seekers with a head for heights, Kinabalu's via ferrata presents a challenge not to be missed. The highest via ferrata in the world, its network of cables and ladders gives hardy hikers access to Kinabalu's otherwise-impenetrable mountain face. There are two routes for those eager to embrace the rock – Walk The Torq, designed for beginners, and the longer Low's Peak Circuit, which presents more of a challenge. Both navigate a series of tightrope cable bridges strung across huge, precipitous drops, with vertical ladders and cliff-edge crossings.



START POINT

KINABALU NATIONAL PARK ENTRANCE

END POINT

KINABALU NATIONAL PARK ENTRANCE

GETTING THERE

From Kota Kinabalu, minivans ferry hikers to the park headquarters. Alternatively, buses running from Kota Kinabalu North Bus Terminal to Ranau, Sandakan or Tawau pass the entrance.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

March to September for the dry season.

WHAT TO WEAR

While lightweight clothing is advantageous through the lower reaches, warm, windproof layers are essential for the summit.

WHAT TO TAKE

A head torch is necessary for the final ascent, and waterproof gloves are recommended for roped sections. Sturdy shoes are a must.

PIT STOPS

There are regular rest stops and toilets to be found along the trail.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Guesthouses and lodges with dorm-style rooms and bunk beds can be found at Laban Rata.

USEFUL WEBSITES

sabahtourism.com
mountaintorq.com
borneoecotours.com

© Getty Images | Words: Joanne Al-Samarae

NEPAL

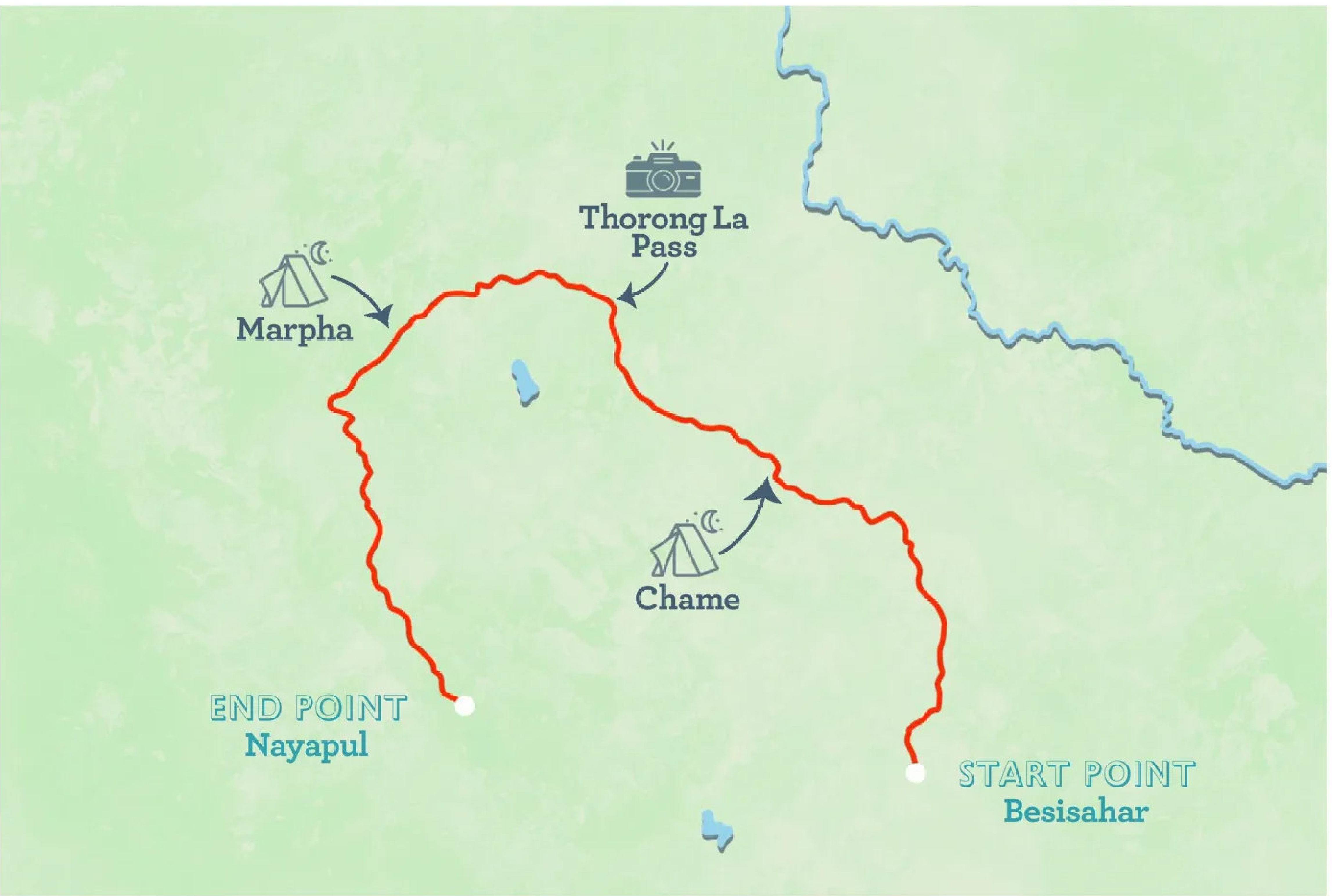
ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT

A spectacular skyline of mountains, quaint villages, stupas and temples above the clouds

220km/137mi | 20 days | Moderate | Point to Point | 18,427m/60,456ft

From humid jungles to open paddy fields and arid canyons to heaven-piercing mountains, the eternally captivating, 220-kilometre-long (137-mile-long) Annapurna Circuit has been the holy grail of trekking for decades. Running anticlockwise, Annapurna's classic trail rolls out of Besisahar, through a wild tangle of banana trees and langur monkeys. Climbing deep into the gorges of the Marshyangdi Valley, it makes for the ramshackle village of Bahundanda. From here, a patchwork of terraced rice fields and fast-flowing rivers lead to Chamje, where the mighty Annapurna begins to reveal enticing glimpses of her 13 peaks, soaring 7,000 metres (22,966 feet) heavenwards.

Continuing north, into the Manang region, corn and potato fields give way to dramatic rhododendron forest. By the quaint village of Tal, picturesque waterfalls pool into a river. From here, the route climbs up to the village of Bagarchhap, sitting at 2,160 metres (7,087 feet), before rising steeply to the busy village of Chame. Leaving Chame, hikers spin prayer wheels engraved with the mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum', before diving deep into pine forest. As the Marsyangdi Valley narrows, the trail, carved directly into vertical rock face, rises steeply. After a vertiginous climb, majestic views of Annapurna II and Pisang Peak come into focus, as does the western rock face of Paungda Danda, which soars 1,500 metres (4,921 feet) above the Marshyangdi river. It's known as Swarga Dwar, meaning 'Gateway to Heaven', and locals believe the spirits of the dead must ascend Paungda Danda to reach heaven.



The Annapurna massif is blessed with one peak over 8,000m (26,246ft) and 13 over 7,000m (22,965ft)

"A TRAIL BLESSED WITH CINEMATIC VIEWS"

The trail continues to Upper Pisang, which is dripping in Gurung and Manangi culture. Steaming cups of smoky butter tea change hands at tin-roofed teahouses, while the trance-inducing chanting of monks reverberates through the monastery courtyard. As the trail slips out of Pisang, it winds through the upper reaches of the Manang District, studded with pagodas and prayer wheels. Herds of yak share the path as it rises to the village, Braga, marked by its beautiful monastery. Then, the trail sweeps round to the village of Manang, famed for its bijou movie theatre.

From here, a choice of day-long acclimatisation hikes can be enjoyed, including the challenging trail to the glacial lake of Kicho Tal, known as Ice Lake. Alternatively, the 400-metre (1,312-foot) scramble to Bhojo Gompa monastery, hidden in a rock wall, rewards with blockbuster views of the Annapurna range. For those willing to linger, enormous icefalls can often be seen crashing down from Gangapurna mountain.

Weaving through the high Himalaya towards the base of Thorong La, the path rises gradually to the village of Gunsang, nestled between juniper shrubs. Following a stream, vegetation disappears and the landscape becomes wild and desolate, save for the blue sheep grazing on the ridgeline. From Thorong High Camp the trail thrusts hikers into a mouth of granite and limestone fangs, known as Thorong La Pass – sitting at 5,416 metres (17,769 feet), it marks the circuit's highest point. Beyond a dressing of colourful prayer flags, there is nothing, except a choppy sea of snow-capped peaks, stretching out towards Tibet.

The gaping chasm of the Kali Gandaki, the deepest gorge in the world, unfolds just ahead. Descending into its desert-like mouth, the trail leads to the holy temple of Muktinath, and unparalleled views of the 8,167-metre-tall (26,795-foot-tall) Dhaulagiri, the world's seventh-highest mountain. With the shrine bustling with both Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims, lucky hikers may witness some remarkable religious ceremonies.

Continuing on, the route dips into the stunningly sleepy village of Kagbeni, complete with stupas and rows of prayer wheels, before rolling on to Marpha. On clear days, the crumpled peaks of Dhaulagiri and Nilgiri accompany much of the journey. As Marpha disappears in the distance, the trail trudges through semi-desert and traditional villages home to the Thakali people. Squeezing between apple orchards, it wriggles through Kalopani and Tatapani, before cutting through ribbons of subtropical forest and unfurling into the beautiful village of Ghorepani.

Departing in the early hours, hikers climb a steep path that slithers up Poon Hill. Reaching the 3,193-metre-high (10,475-foot-high) summit at sunrise, illuminated views of Mustang and nearby Pokhara roll out across the horizon, as the snowy peaks of Annapurna South, Annapurna I and Dhaulagiri bathe in orange light. Descending through rhododendron forests, the trail is blessed with cinematic farewell views of the fish-tailed Machhapuchhare, Annapurna South and Hiunchuli mountains.

START POINT
BESISAHAR

END POINT
NAYAPUL

GETTING THERE

Buses and microbuses run regularly from Kathmandu and Pokhara to Besisahar.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

September to November for clear skies, mid-February to April for long, warm days, or November to December for quiet trails.

WHAT TO WEAR

Layers are required to keep warm at higher altitudes, as is a hat to protect from the sub-freezing temperatures of the Thorong La Pass.

WHAT TO TAKE

Head torches are essential to aid early-morning and late-night climbs. Sleeping bags, water purification tablets and hydration bladders are all highly recommended, as is sunscreen.

PIT STOPS

Delicious local dishes, like dal bhat, are served up at teahouses along the trail. There are toilets dotted along the route.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Teahouses and lodges are scattered across the trail, and porters can climb ahead to secure rooms for the night.

USEFUL WEBSITES

welcomenepal.com
ntnc.org.np
ethicaladventuresnepal.com

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ASIA

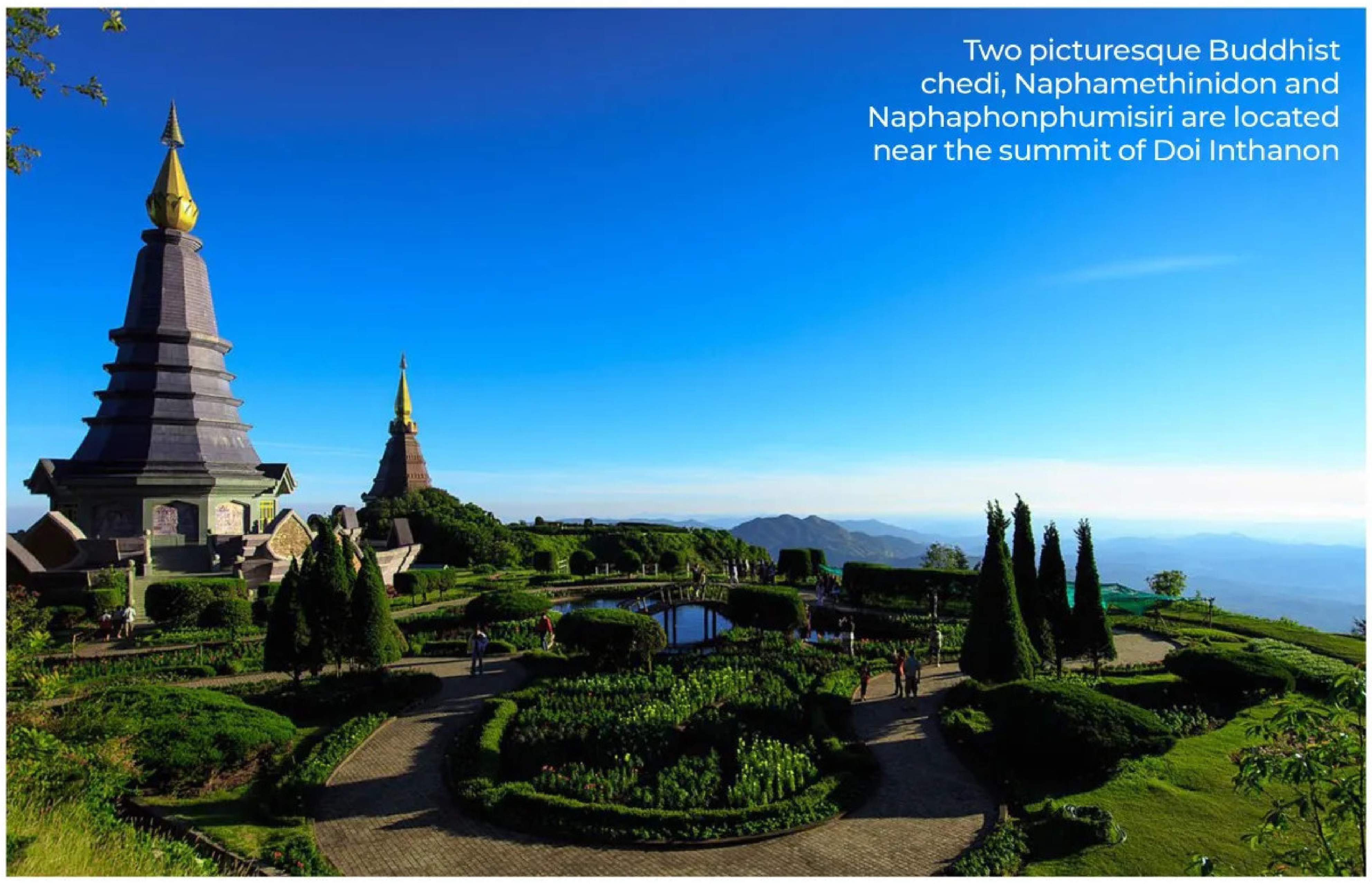
BEST OF THE REST

The vast and varied climate and topography of Asia offers hikers many options when it comes to exploring the great outdoors

DOI INTHANON NATIONAL PARK

Thailand

Towering 2,565m (8,415ft) above sea level, Doi Inthanon is the highest mountain peak in Thailand and the focus of hikers who travel to northern Thailand and Doi Inthanon National Park to experience the flora, fauna and spectacular scenery. About 100km (62mi) southwest of the city of Chiang Mai, the park is easily accessible by car and the trails are well maintained. The distance covered along the most popular path, the Kew Mae Pan Nature Trail, is only 3km (1.8mi), but visitors routinely allocate two to four hours to complete the easy trek. The trail winds through lush, evergreen forests with ferns and flowers growing in the shadows of tall, old-growth trees, to open meadows, and along a ridgeline with views of the forest and the valley on either side. Hikers may also divert to the summit of Doi Inthanon, a distance of 4.5km (2.8mi). In either case, a guide is required, and the cost is £4.65 ($6.40). The trail is closed during the rainy season from June to October.



Two picturesque Buddhist chedi, Naphamethinidon and Naphaphonphumisiri are located near the summit of Doi Inthanon

© WIKI/ Lester Mathias Andersson

MOUNT SEORAKSAN AND DINOSAUR RIDGE

Gangwon-do Province, South Korea

About three hours from the South Korean capital of Seoul, Seoraksan National Park is a jewel nestled within the mountainous countryside of Gangwon-do Province. The most popular hike is the 6.5km (4mi) trek from the park entrance at Seoraksan to Madeungryeong Pass. The hike is challenging as more than half its distance involves climbing stairs and rocks to reach the designated photo-opportunity areas, while narrow passages and other areas require the use of ropes. The spectacular rock formations of Dinosaur Ridge, also known as Gongnyong Ridge, are among the most famous in Asia. Located about 5km (3.1mi) into the hike, Dinosaur Ridge is so named because its stones resemble the raised scales on the back of a stegosaurus. Most treks begin before dawn to view the breathtaking sunrise. Buses run regularly from Seoul to the city of Sokcho, and a short cab ride will deliver hikers back to the entrance of the national park.

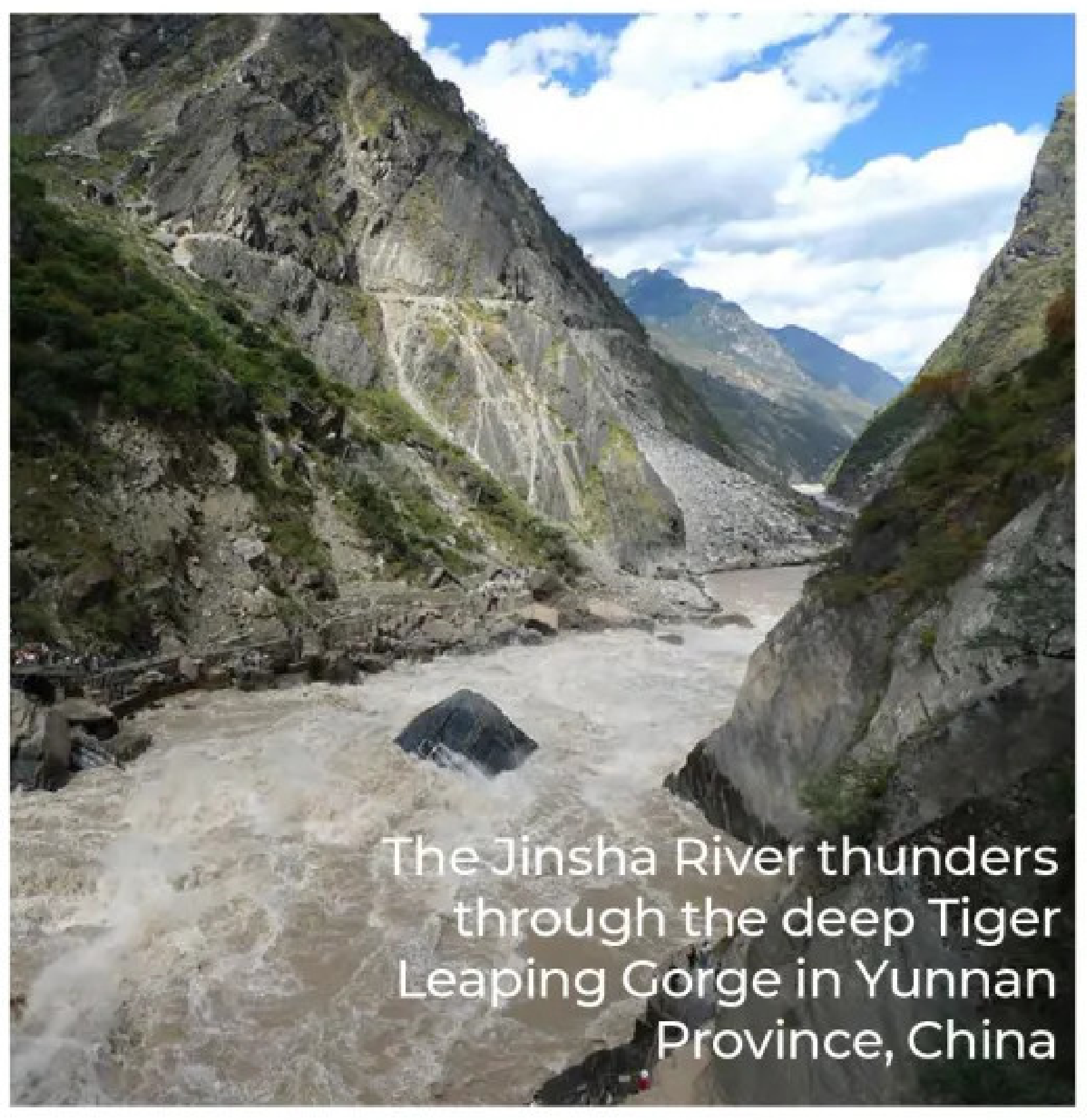
Dinosaur Ridge is a highlight of Seoraksan National Park

© WIKI/ Taewangkorea

TIGER LEAPING GORGE

Yunnan Province, China

Near the town of Lijiang in China's Yangtze River Valley, Tiger Leaping Gorge is among the world's deepest (and most spectacular) river canyons. The popular upper trail runs 22.5km (14mi) above the Jinsha River, a tributary of the Yangtze. The hike is strenuous. The altitude increases steadily, and there's a section of nearly vertical switchbacks called 28 Bends that climbs from 1,981m (6,500ft) to 2,591m (8,500ft). Natural wonders abound, including canyon vistas and the massif of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Since the entire upper trail typically requires nine to ten hours to complete, and the return, which involves a descent to the bottom of the gorge, takes four to five hours, most hikers opt for a two-day experience. The upper trail entrance fee is £7.20 ($10), while the descent costs another £1.10 ($1.50). Guest houses are located along the trek, and buses depart regularly from the vicinity of the Zen Garden Hotel in Lijiang.



The Jinsha River thunders through the deep Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan Province, China

© WIKI/ Gisling

Sunshine gleams across a section of the mighty Chadar Trek

© WIKI/ Goutam 1962

CHADAR TREK

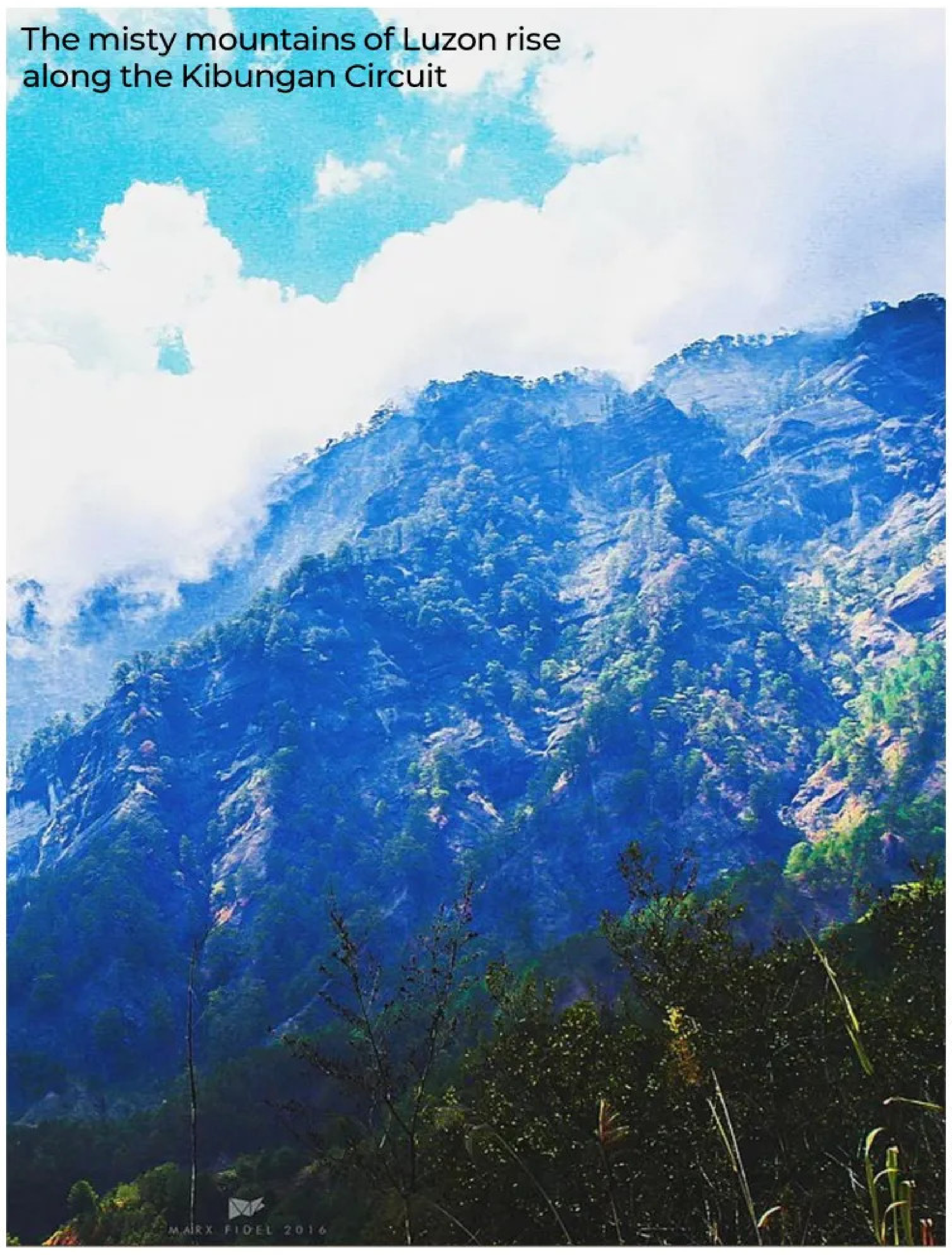
Zanskar, Ladakh Territory, India

One of the most dazzling yet perilous winter hikes in the world, Chadar Trek is a sometimes-hazardous journey through the Himalayas along the frozen Zanskar River. Trekkers find themselves walking along the glass-like surface while sheer cliffs loom on both sides. Tour companies provide guides for this 62km (38.5mi) adventure, and groups rarely number more than 15. Altitudes reach 3,353m (11,000ft), and temperatures may plunge to -30 degrees Celsius (-22 degrees Farenheit), but conditions have been described as harsh but not unbearable. Previous experience in winter hiking is a must as participants are regularly required to clear their own pathways due to excessive snowfall or breaks in the river ice. One of the highlights of the nine-day hike along the Zanskar is the stunning spectacle of the Nerak Waterfall, frozen from top to bottom. Government regulations require a medical examination prior to departure (a change brought in in 2019 to reduce the number of casualties on the trek), and individual expenses for the Chadar Trek are approximately £230 ($315).

KIBUNGAN CIRCUIT

Kibungan, Benguet Province, Philippines

In the province of Benguet on the Philippine island of Luzon, the Kibungan Circuit is one of Asia's lesser-known but no less spectacular hikes. Adventurers may customise their experience to fit their length of stay, and one of the best options is the 17km (10.6mi) loop from Kibungan to Mt. Tagpaya, rising 1,820m (5,971ft) above sea level. The trail is challenging, but along the two-day trek wildflowers bloom in abundance. Rice terraces, evergreen forests, caves, villages, rivers and waterfalls are common. The region is known as the 'Switzerland of the Philippines', and guides are available for hire. Bus transportation from the major city of Manila to the town of Baguio and from Baguio to Kibungan runs daily.



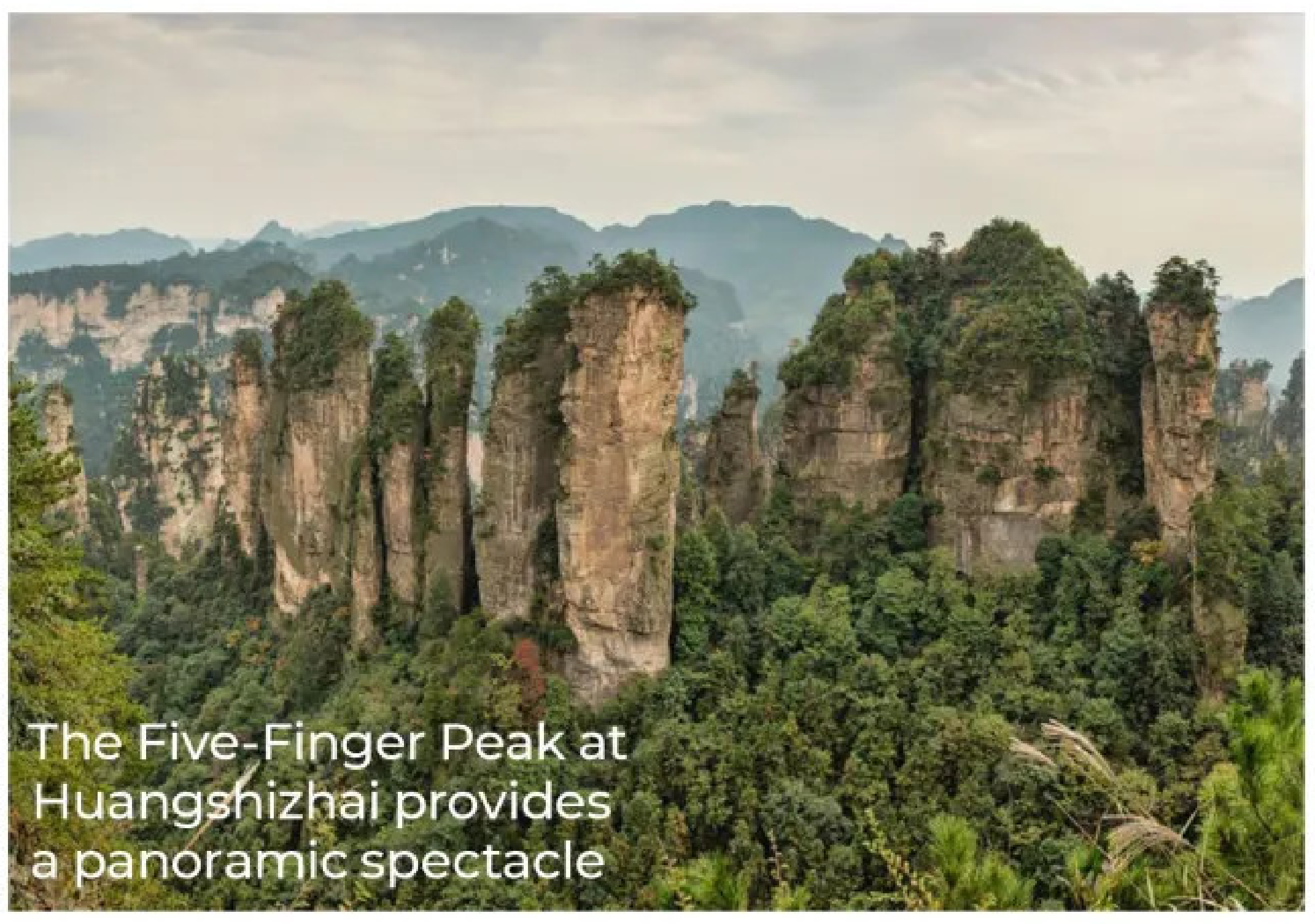
The misty mountains of Luzon rise along the Kibungan Circuit

© WIKI/ Marx Fidel

AVATAR MOUNTAIN HIKE

Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, Hunan Province, China

China's Wulingyuan Scenic Area is a UNESCO World Heritage Site about 30km (18.6mi) from Zhangjiajie City in the Hunan Province of China. Its famous mountains offer challenging hikes, and those who make the trek view wondrous peaks also known as the Avatar Mountains, having inspired scenery in the film *Avatar*. The park spans 264km^2 (102mi^2) – it's so big you'd need a week to see it all, and entry tickets are valid for four days. Numerous stone paths course through the area, and one of the most popular hikes stretches a 24km (15mi) round-trip from the base of Huangshizhai to its summit, including Five-Finger Peak, rising 1,200m (3,937ft). The 3,000 stairs are strenuous, but the scenery is captivating. Wild monkeys stand watch. The entire hike requires around four hours, and a cable car runs regularly from the base to the summit and back if you can't face the stairs.



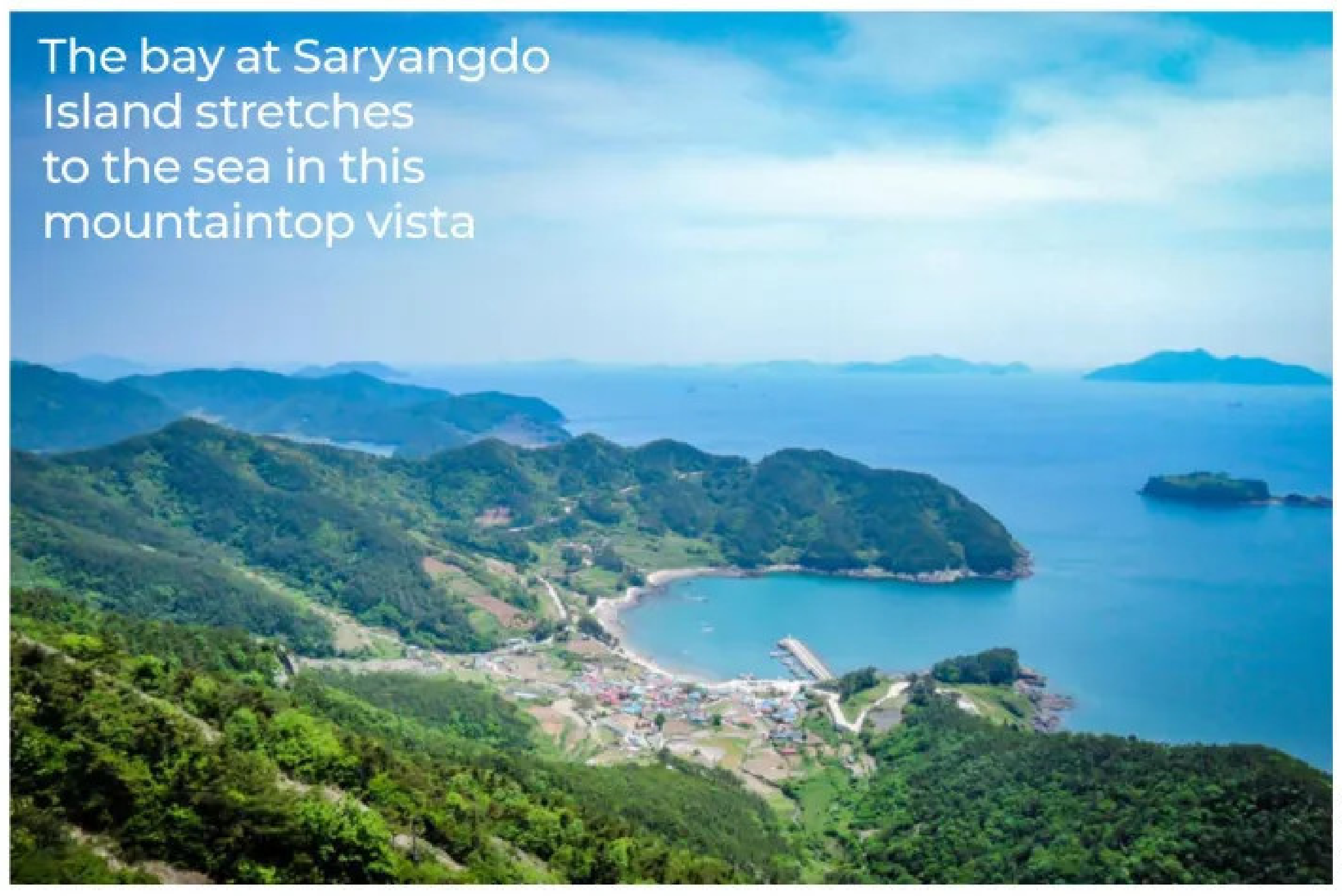
The Five-Finger Peak at Huangshizhai provides a panoramic spectacle

© WIKI/Chensiyuan

JAGGED RIDGE TRAIL

Saryangdo Island, South Korea

Hikers of the Jagged Ridge Trail experience the beauty of seven mountain peaks and distant views of the island of Saryangdo and the surrounding sea. One of the most popular hikes in South Korea, this 6km (3.7mi) trek is challenging due to its steep climb. Access to the island requires a lengthy mainland bus ride from Busan to Tongyeong, a coastal city in South Gyeongsang Province, and then a 15-minute ferry ride. The entire hike takes around five hours (allow as much time as you can – you don't want to rush this), and sizable rock formations and boulders present significant obstacles to those without climbing skills. A few of the formations are sharp and quite hazardous, but the views from the tops of the peaks make the climbing worthwhile.



The bay at Saryangdo Island stretches to the sea in this mountaintop vista

© Alamy

Words: Mike Haskew

LOOK OUT FOR THESE SYMBOLS OVER THE FOLLOWING PAGES

- DISTANCE
- DURATION
- DIFFICULTY
- ROUTE TYPE
- ELEVATION GAIN
- PHOTO OPPORTUNITY
- PLACE TO STAY
- PLACE OF INTEREST
- PLACE TO EAT

OCEANIA

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DOVE LAKE CIRCUIT, AUSTRALIA

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ABEL TASMAN COAST TRACK, NEW ZEALAND

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GREAT OCEAN WALK, AUSTRALIA

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TONGARIRO ALPINE CROSSING, NEW ZEALAND

126
BEST OF THE REST

© Getty Images

AUSTRALIA

HEYSEN TRAIL

This Australian journey combines unique wildlife, landscapes and spiritual beginnings

1,200km/746mi

2 months

Difficult

Point to Point

28,873m/94,727ft

START POINT
CAPE JERVIS

END POINT
PARACHILNA GORGE

GETTING THERE

The closest airport is Adelaide. A bus service runs twice a day from Adelaide Center to Cape Jervis. Alternatively, a bus runs five days a week between Victor Harbor and Cape Jervis.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

April to July, setting off in the autumn months of the cooler south and arriving in the temperate winter of the hotter mid-north.

WHAT TO WEAR

Clothing for every climate, including waterproofs, UV protective layers, sunglasses and a peaked cap.

WHAT TO TAKE

A butane cooking set, food, first aid kit, hiking poles, a hydration bladder, water filter, sunscreen, pocket knife and solar chargers.

PIT STOPS

The majority of the route is remote and forward-planning stops for provisions, water, food and sanitation is key.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

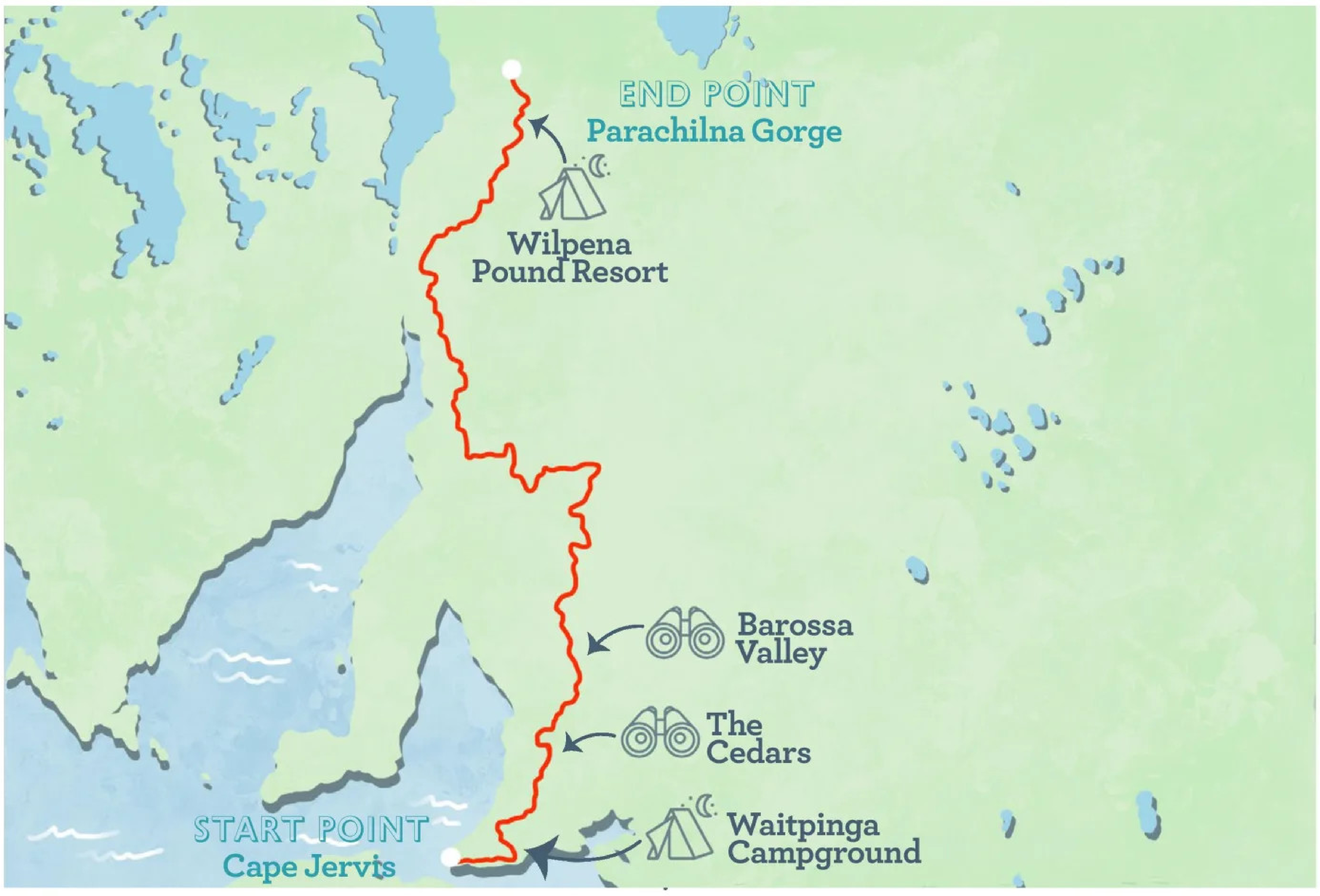
Camping is essential, though there are some cabins and homesteads along the route, and more luxurious options closer to the larger towns.

USEFUL WEBSITES

heysentrail.asn.au
hansheysen.com.au
wilpenapound.com.au

One of the world's most exceptional trails, the Heysen spans 1,200 kilometres (746 miles), from Cape Jervis in the south to Parachilna Gorge in the north, through ancient bushland and soaring forests to the vast outback. At the Cape Jervis trailhead, hikers begin their journey by a red arrow on a white plate – a sign they'll come to know well over the 60 days ahead. The path winds along the water's edge of the Southern Ocean, the enormity of the journey stretching ahead. Rolling hills of scrub fall away into the inky swell below, where Australia's vast array of sea life is on full display – seals, dolphins and southern right whale sightings aren't uncommon – offering an early promise of what the Heysen has in store. Entering Deep Creek Conservation Park, the trail climbs through ancient bushland, where kangaroos mother their joeys, to Cobbler Hill, with magnificent views over Backstairs Passage to Kangaroo Island.

The trail spits walkers into Newland Head, on the southern tip of the Fleurieu Peninsula. It's a land of wide beaches, deep-blue ocean and golden sunsets. Surfers ride long rolling waves, while fishing spots invite anglers to catch themselves a hearty supper. At the Waitpinga Campground, situated just 100 metres (328 feet) from the beach, hikers can hear the crashing waves as they bed down beneath the stars. Skirting Victor Harbour, the trail heads inland through green hills and native gum orchards leading towards Myponga, gradually climbing to Mount



With views like this, the Heysen will stay with you for a lifetime

“River red gum forests come alive with the sounds of the outback”

Cone and beyond, into the tall timber of the Mount Lofty Range.

The Hahndorf Spur leads to a town founded by German settlers, home to the trail’s namesake, the famed naturalist painter Hans Heysen (1877-1968CE). His love for the Australian landscape is on show at The Cedars, once his home and studio, and now a museum to his long legacy. Tours start at around £8.50 ($15).

Pine and eucalyptus forests punctuate patchwork cropland on the way to Cleland Conservation Park and the rainforest-like majesty of Montacute Conservation Park, before the walk veers on to the Barossa Valley – Southern Australia’s world-renowned wine region. Along backroads, past picturesque vineyards akin to Europe’s pastoral south, the trail nips through the small towns of Tanunda and Greenock. Here, thru-hikers recharge and unwind, sampling wines, enjoying fresh local produce and touring the many vineyards, some of which offer accommodation on-site. The Heysen then leads to the time-warped mining towns of Kapunda and Burra, established by migrating Cornish miners in the 1840s’ copper boom and complete with ornate 19th-century public buildings and saloons.

Beyond Mount Bryan East, farmland begins to give way to pine forests and semi-arid scrubland – a promise of the outback to come. In Mount Remarkable National Park, adventurers squeeze through Alligator Gorge, carved out of ancient sandstone and quartzite, into sugar gum woodlands, before reaching Dutchmans Stern Conservation Park, where they drink in the refreshing sights of the distant Spencer Gulf. In the shadow of the Elder Ranges and Mount Aleck in the Flinders Ranges, the crumpled red imagery of the outback comes into focus as the landscape gradually turns an earthy brown and then red as the trail sweeps north into kangaroo heartlands and Mars-like rock formations.

Bridle Gap Lookout offers one of the trail’s most extraordinary vistas – uninterrupted views of the majestic Bunbinyunna, Elder and Red Ranges erupting from scorched plains, seemingly conjured from the earth in the Aboriginal Dreamtime, before man.

After ascending the southern slopes of the monolithic Wilpena Pound, across the bowl-shaped valley floor, cypress pine and river red gum forests come alive with the sounds of the outback, from wrens, eagles and parrots, to emus, kangaroos and rare sightings of the yellow-footed wallaby. At Wilpena Pound Resort, local Yura guides lead tours to sacred Aboriginal sites, including Arkaroo Rock, where complex Adnyamathanha cave-paintings – believed to be 5,000 years old – explore the Dreamtime creation of the Wilpena Pound.

The last leg winds through the wide, sweeping valleys of Trezona and Aroona, before climbing across the ABC Range, which offers yet more stunning views. As the end nears, with the Parachilna Gorge trailhead in sight, the journey is no longer ahead but behind; the stark wilderness tamed, the colossal conquered.

© Getty Images | Words: Joanne Al-Samarae

AUSTRALIA

DOVE LAKE CIRCUIT

A tranquil journey in the very heart of the Tasmanian wilderness

5.7km/3.5mi

2 hours

Easy

Loop

240m/787ft

The Ballroom Forest is a magnificent ancient collection of myrtle-beech rainforest, which has somehow remained intact

Occupying a fifth of Australia's southern island of Tasmania, the Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park is the centrepiece of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. At its northern end is its beating heart and namesake, Cradle Mountain, whose twin dolerite spires roar upwards from the untamed Aussie outback. At its feet, hikers begin their clockwise circumnavigation of the chilling, glacially carved Dove Lake. Sapping tannins from native tea tree vegetation and buttongrass, the water is dyed a distinctive dark blue, which nevertheless looks a little like tea from the shallow shoreline, and its surface reflects the surrounding snow-capped peaks.

The path cuts through iconic Tasmanian buttongrass and the finely fronded alpine coral fern, over a series of rocky steps, towards an enormous rock on its eastern coast. This colossal specimen is Glacier Rock, a snapshot of Mother Nature's unfathomable might. A postcard from the Ice Age, the rock bears striations running parallel to the lake itself, caused by rocky debris caught up when the glaciers scraped out the basin that is now home to Dove Lake. As the path becomes a boardwalk, it's cloaked in low forest and shrubbery, before the bush gives way to a curious, sandy beach hugging the lakeside. A kaleidoscope of yellow, orange, brown and black spread outwards to the lake, a magnificent contrast to the reflected views of Tasmania's magnificent mountain.

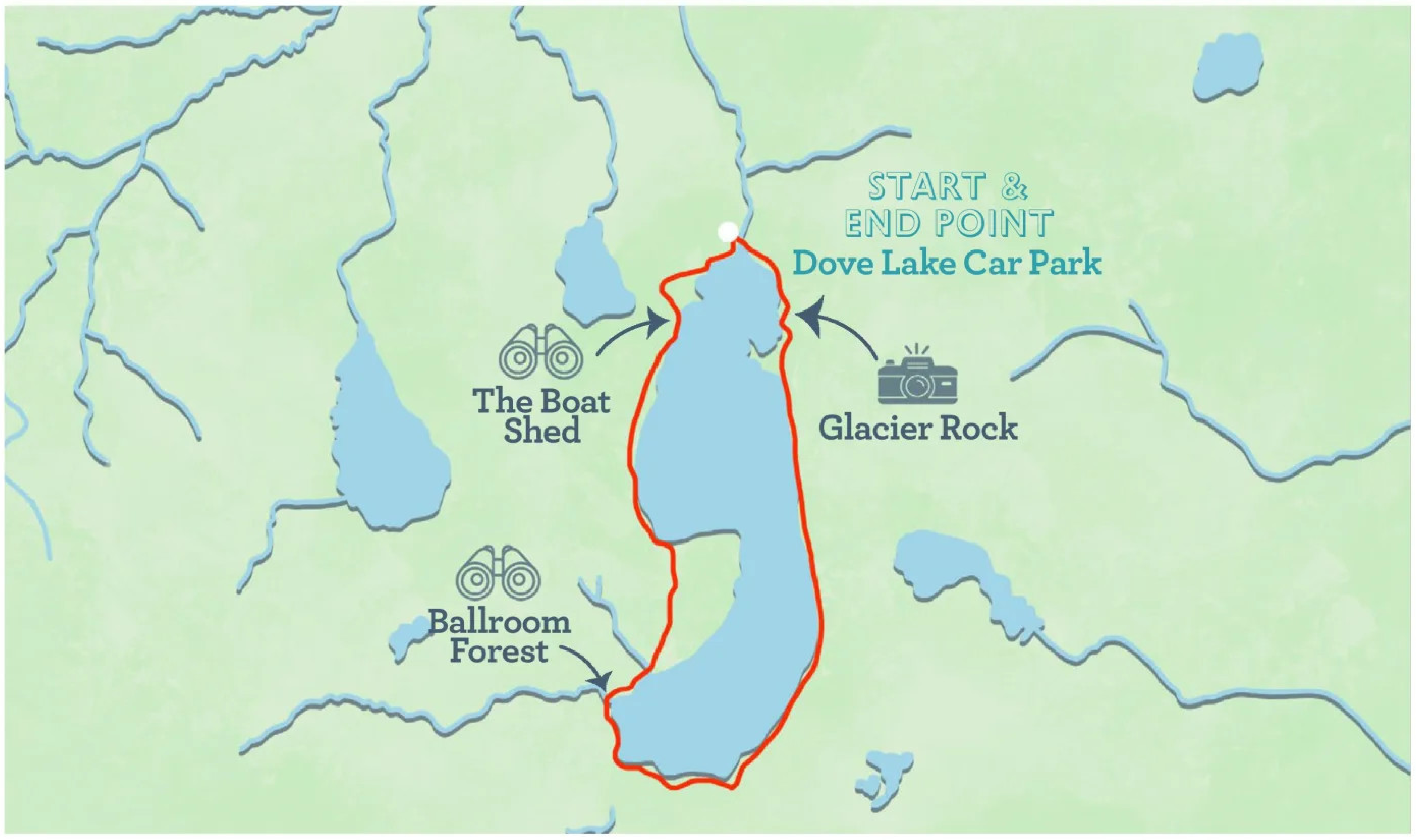
Continuing, the route traverses a rock face, where a platform offers a spectacular vista of the lake's Honeymoon Islands. The path forwards is framed by stunning pandanus palm trees. Numerous creeks and tributaries intersect the bush, flowing into the nearby Lake Wilks in a symphony of trickles, like many little waterfalls, while the heady scent of wildflowers fills the air.

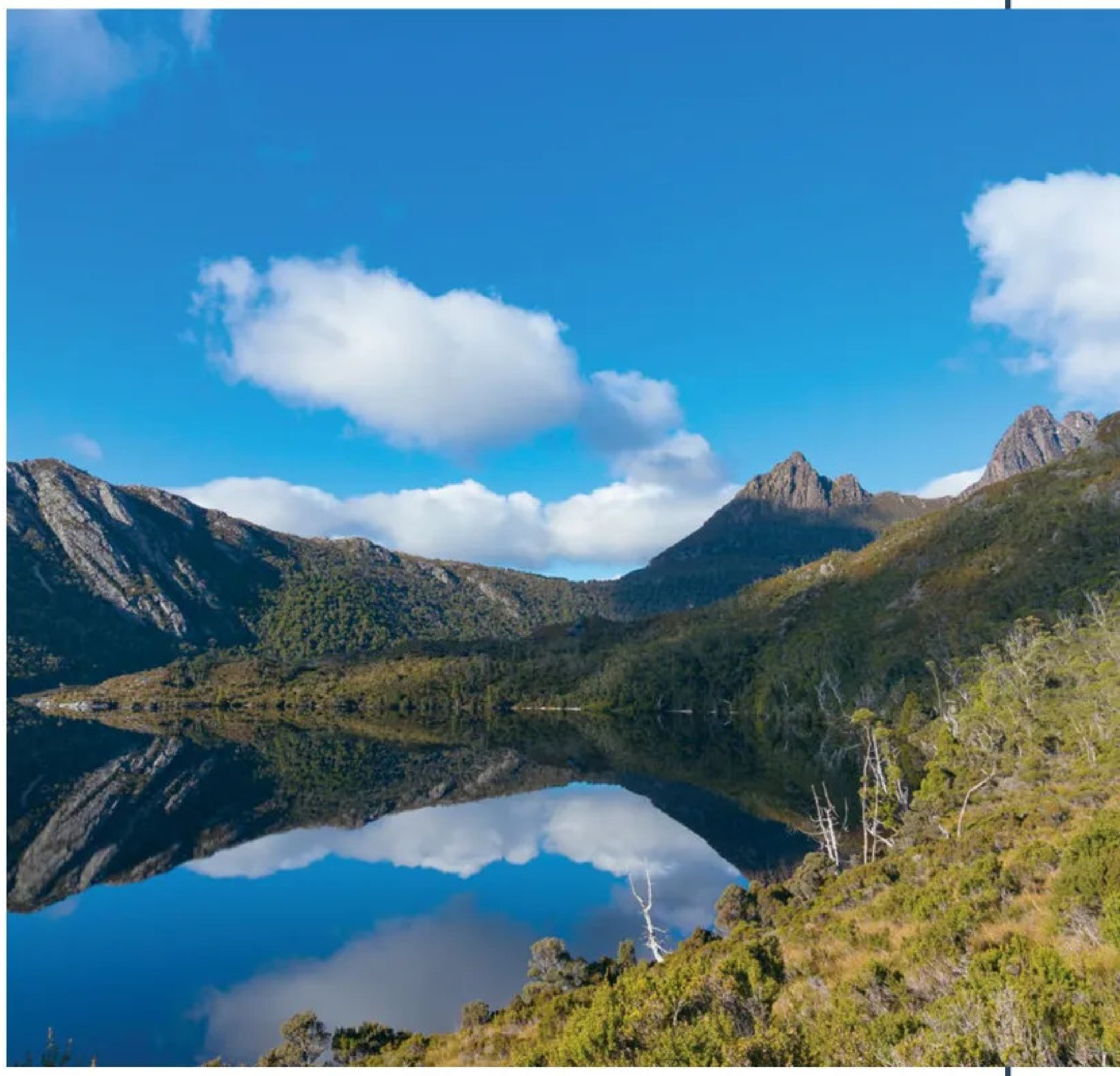
As you might expect, the area is a haven for wildlife, so the walk is great for spotting a cast of colourful critters. One of Australia's native cats, the near-threatened spotted-tail quoll, makes dens in tree hollows, logs and crevices, where it hides during the day before hunting alone at night. Capable predators, they can even scale trees in search of birds, possums and rabbits. Rather less intimidating, the platypus drifts across the water, using its partially webbed back feet as a rudder, and its claws to burrow on land. Fascinatingly, these bizarre animals even produce venom in their hind legs (don't worry, it's not fatal to humans!). Another unusual local is the echidna, or spiny anteater. A quiet, stoic creature, it uses its super-hearing and smell to find termite mounds to claw out, before darting out its long, sticky tongue and lapping up its meal. Undoubtedly, though, the star of the show is the small, dog-like Tasmanian devil, whose mighty jaws can tear through fur and bones with ease. Eating is a ritualistic act, where the nocturnal devils assert their dominance by making the most noise.

As explorers wind their way around the lake's western shore, they arrive at Ballroom Forest, a stunning ode to an age gone by. This cool rainforest is a rare anomaly – Tasmania's fire-sensitive plants are usually burned away by bushfire. Somehow, this cathedral of nature has survived intact, a sacred dispensary of Australia's natural heritage. Ancient myrtle-beech trees sway 55 metres (180 feet) above the shadowed canopy, moss clinging to their hardy trunks. They are joined by Tasmania's endemic King Billy pine, a deceptively humble-looking tree that seeds every five or so years, but can live for thousands. Every April and May, the park's fagus, another deciduous beech, sweep like wildfire across the landscape, turning into rich yellows and oranges, before falling for the winter onto the moss-covered forest floor.

The area echoes with the calls of Tasmania's magnificent birds, dominated by its only endemic parrot species, the Green Rosella – the country's largest rosella, coloured with a splattering of bright yellow, green, red, blue and black. Alongside this elusive, blue-winged parrot, olive whistlers sing their distinctive sonata, and stocky little scrubtits dart for the ground, picking up spiders, before retiring back to the treetops. Strong-billed and yellow-throated honeyeaters cause a minor racket, picking and scraping bark off the ancient trees in search of food. Tasmania's largest honeyeater, the yellow wattlebird, meanwhile, gargles and coughs, throwing its head back and forth like a headbanger, while the narrow-faced black currawong scavenges for berries, insects and even young birds.

A short detour up the steep path to Marion's Lookout provides beautiful views, before the main track winds past the Boat Shed on the way back to the foot of Cradle Mountain. Built mostly of King Billy pine by the region's first ranger, Lionell Connell, in 1940, the Boat Shed remained in use until the 1960s and careful restoration work was carried out in 1983. Like the lake itself, the Shed is a poignant testament to the great Tasmanian wilderness.





START POINT

DOVE LAKE CAR PARK

END POINT

DOVE LAKE CAR PARK

GETTING THERE

Both Hobart, four hours' drive away, and Launceston, two hours by car, have airports. Otherwise, take the ferry from Melbourne to Davenport, which is an hour-and-a-half's drive.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Visit from April to May to see the 'turning of the fagus', when the leaves become fiery hues.

WHAT TO WEAR

Be sure to wear decent hiking shoes, suitable for all terrains. Bring warm, precipitation-proof clothing in case the weather turns, as well as a sun hat and water.

WHAT TO TAKE

Given that it is a short walk, hikers can pack light. Take enough water and a camera.

PIT STOPS

There are toilets at the Dove Lake Car Park, and the park's northern gate visitor's centre, as well as picnic facilities at Ronnie Creek.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

There are a variety of accommodation options scattered around the park, from luxurious eco-lodges to self-catering cabins and houses. You may never want to leave!

USEFUL WEBSITES

parks.tas.gov.au
www.australia.com
www.tasmania.com

© Getty Images | Words: Hareth Al Bustani

NEW ZEALAND

ABEL TASMAN COAST TRACK

From forested mountains and mossy valleys to golden shores

60km/37mi

3 to 5 days

Easy

Point to Point

1,800m/5,905ft

Amidst the forest, the Falls River Swing Bridge hangs 20m (66ft) above the ground

Stretching along the northern coast of New Zealand's South Island is a unique paradise, where golden beaches rise into mighty granite cliffs, behind a veil of lush forest. The Abel Tasman Coast Track, and the national park it wends its way through, are named after the Dutch explorer who became the first European to reach New Zealand in 1642.

The hike begins in the south of the park, where heavenly turquoise water laps at glistening shoreline, feeding into a tidal estuary. Sat alongside the coast is the small town of Mārahau, or 'Windy Garden', believed to have once been a Māori agricultural centre. Awash with chic eateries, stunning lodges, waterfront beer gardens and pop-up burger joints, it makes a perfect launchpad for the adventure ahead.

Mārahau catapults its adventurers along a causeway, through open country and into a thick beech forest, filled with the country's endemic kānuka trees. Growing to heights of over 15 metres (50 feet), these specimens are dressed in leathery strips of bark, sprouting bunches of small white flowers. Travelling beneath their shadows, hikers weave between picturesque gullies, before the path opens out to views of the stunning Anchorage Bay – a curved stretch of beach, overflowing with cloud-like greenery. In the distance, boats cut white streaks in the ocean, glistening blue and green.

A short detour from here leads to the immaculate horseshoe-shaped Te Pukatea Bay – among the park's most beautiful – where a walking track traverses up Pitt

New Zealand's smallest national park, Abel Tasman is named after the first European to arrive on New Zealand, in 1642

> "AN UNTOUCHED SLICE OF NATURAL PERFECTION, HIDDEN FROM THE WORLD"

Head, to an ancient Māori 'pā', or fort. With terracing and food pits still visible, the site unfolds into sweeping views. Back on the main trail, explorers can either walk around Rākauroa, or Torrent Bay, or simply cross over it within two hours of the low tide. The beach is once again transformed into thick, coastal forest, where a 47-metre-long (154-foot-long) suspension bridge hovers between the trees above Falls River.

Journeying beneath thick overgrowth, another set of optional detours are available, the first of which arrives at Cleopatra's Pool, a rock pool with its own natural, moss-lined water slide. However, the path to the pool, which involves crossing a river, can be dangerous after a spell of heavy rain. The second detour goes up one of the park's steepest and trickiest paths into the bowels of the forest's native bush. Your efforts are well rewarded with up-close views of the otherworldly Cascade Falls. Chillingly cold water rushes down a sheer cliff, drenched in green moss; an untouched slice of natural perfection, hidden away from all the world.

Continuing on, while the trees at Wairima, or Bark Bay, used to be a vital source of bark, today they are happily left to their own devices. You can spend the night here at the nearby hut or campsite. If skies are clear, campers can gaze up at the stars in all their glory. While the estuary here can only be crossed during the low tide, the detour around it is but a short ten-minute walk. Golden sand rises into clusters of mānuka tea trees, which form nursery forests on regenerating land across the park.

The forests fill with the melodious sound of bellbirds – females coloured a dull olive-brown with a pale-yellow cheek stripe, and males, olive green with a black outer wing and tail feathers. The fantail, with its small head and bill, chimes in with its own distinctive 'cheet cheet'. As it chases down insects, its long tail bursts open into a fan shape, enabling it to perform sharp turns. Although the park used to be filled with kākā – large, forest-dwelling parrots – the introduction of predators has seen numbers dwindle. They were even considered to be 'technically extinct' for a while, until a group of captive female birds joined the males in the park, giving birth to wild chicks for the first time in decades. Having reduced the number of predators across Abel Tasman, 12 kākā were released in the park in 2019, a countrywide record.

A campsite now occupies the former Tonga Quarry. Granite was mined here from 1900 to 1910, with the stone being used to build Wellington's Public Trust Building and the steps to the cathedral in Nelson. The path from here opens up to Onetahuti Bay, locally nicknamed Tonga Bay – one of the park's longest stretches of beach. A small estuary behind the beach forms a meeting point for herons, oyster catchers and other wading birds. On the opposite side, the shoreline overlooks Tonga Island Marine Reserve, where dolphins, seals and penguins congregate, amidst sandy beaches, boulder headlands, rocky reefs and estuaries. Scuba divers can explore the reserve's northern reef systems, to a depth of 15 metres (50

START POINT
MĀRAHAU

END POINT
WAINUI BAY

GETTING THERE

Abel Tasman Coast Track is easily reached via Nelson by bus, car and water taxi. Nelson Airport has daily flights from a number of major cities in the country, including Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

Either between October to April for long days and warm nights, or from May to August for fewer visitors and calmer waters.

WHAT TO WEAR

Avoid wearing cotton items as the huts don't have clothes-drying facilities. Wind- and rain-proof coats are also recommended.

WHAT TO TAKE

As well as everything you need for camping and cooking, hikers are required to print off booking confirmations for camping and huts.

PIT STOPS

Toilets are dotted around park entrances, campsites and huts.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

Four huts and 18 campsites are spread across the Abel Tasman Coast Track, but must be booked in advance.

USEFUL WEBSITES

abeltasman.com
doc.govt.nz
newzealand.com

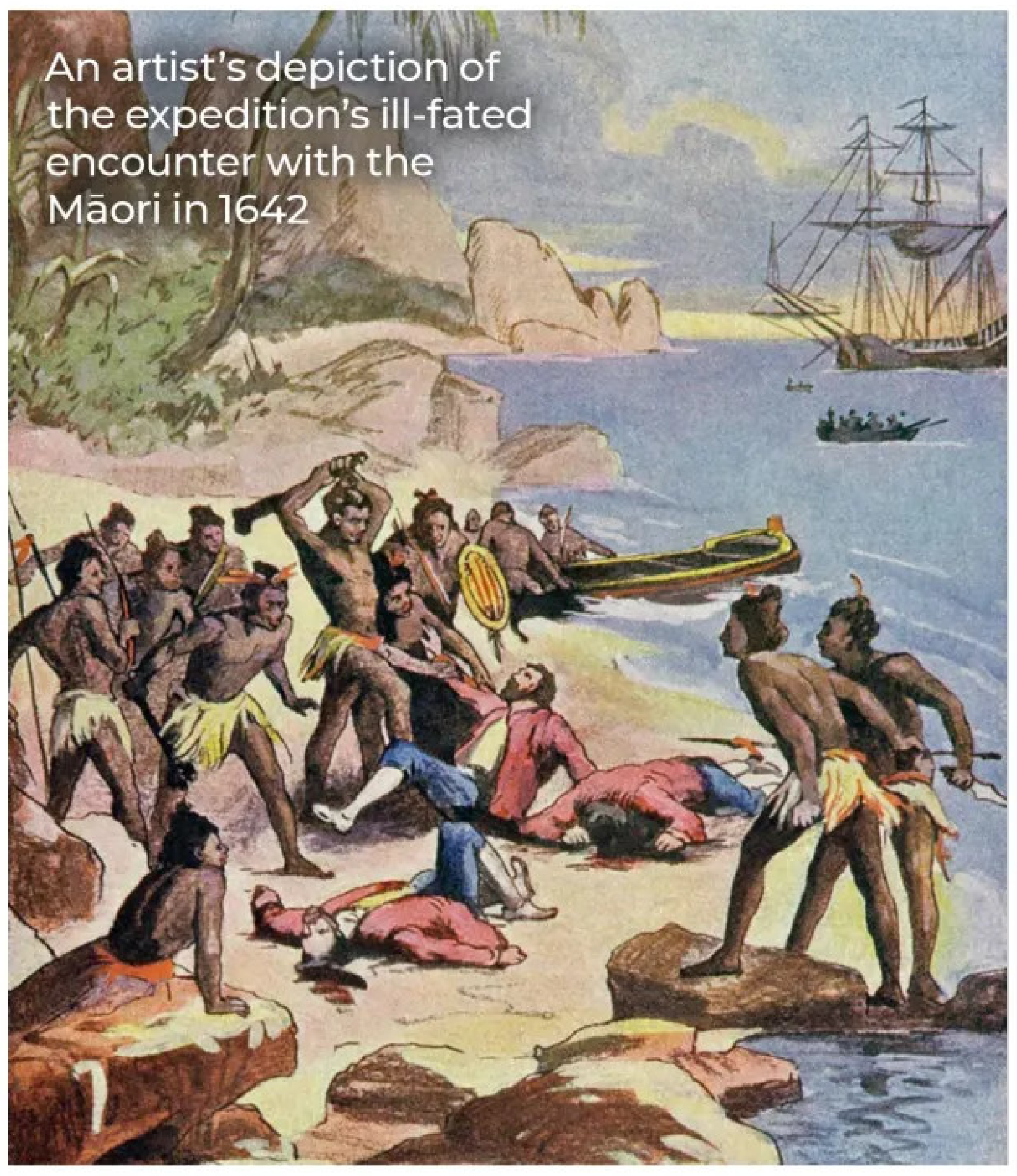
© Getty Images, Free Vector Maps | Words: Hareth Al Bustani

ABEL TASMAN'S JOURNEY EAST

After a stint patrolling the seas of modern Indonesia for smugglers and rebels, in 1642 Dutch sailor Abel Tasman was tasked with leading an expedition to the "still unexplored South- and East-land." Setting off from Batavia, capital of the Dutch East Indies (now Jakarta, Indonesia) with two small ships, he first sailed to Mauritius, before heading east. The crew spotted the mountains of an island that Tasman named 'Van Diemen's Land' (now Tasmania). They pressed on, finally anchoring at Whariwharangi Bay of New Zealand's South Island, near the Wainui Inlet in what is now the north of Abel Tasman National Park.

On 18 December 1642, the local Māori of Ngāti Tūmatakōkiri paddled out to the bizarre vessels, and challenged them with ritualistic incantations and trumpet blasts. The Dutch responded by blowing their own and firing off a cannon, angering the locals. The next day, the Dutch were surrounded by Māori waka (canoes), and four of their men were clubbed to death. Tasman named the area Moordenaars (Murderers') Bay and left, travelling up and along the North Island. Modern archaeological research suggests that the crew had landed near an important agricultural area that the Māori were trying to defend. It would be 127 years before Europeans next met the Māori.

After sailing past the North Island, Tasman came close to Three Kings Islands, where a group of locals yelled at his ships and threw stones from the cliffs. After restocking in Tonga and passing Fiji, the crew visited New Guinea, before returning to Batavia.


An artist's depiction of the expedition's ill-fated encounter with the Māori in 1642

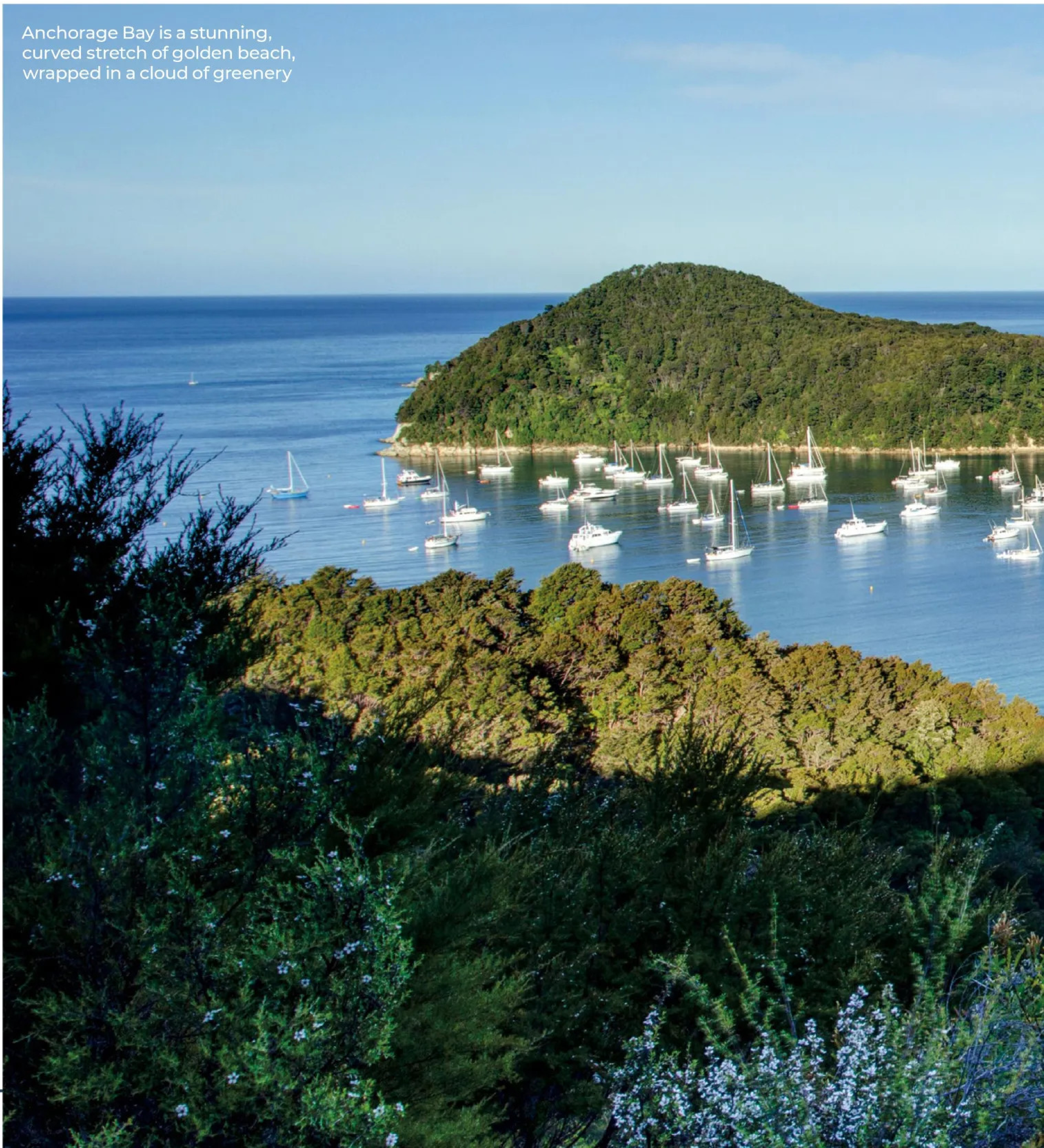
feet), where underwater rocks are coated in a striking film of pink algae – joined by kina (sea urchins), turban shell sea snails, eels, crayfish, snappers and more. In the winter, lucky kayakers might even get visited by inquisitive dolphins and penguins.

At the end of Tonga Bay, a boardwalk and bridge enable hikers to cross over the forested Tonga Saddle, regardless of tide activity. As the sun beats down overhead, a corridor cuts its way through stunning overgrowth, and across picturesque estuaries. Against a backdrop of forested mountains and hills, its gates open up to a remarkable lookout point, overlooking the beautiful Awaroa Bay. In 2016, a crowdfunding campaign led to Awaroa Beach being purchased from its private owner after tens of thousands of donors raised more than NZ$2 million. They ceded it to the national park in order to protect the land from being over-developed or spoiled, leaving an untouched slice of perfection, for all to enjoy.

Crossing over the Awaroa Inlet takes some planning, as it must be done during low tide, and takes 25 minutes to complete. Visitors should keep an eye out for tide heights, storms and rainfall, and only cross during the day. On the other side, the path winds along golden sandy beaches and rocky headlands, scattered with regenerating forests. The campsite at Tōtaranui is a great place to stop for refreshments while taking a moment to enjoy the scenery.

North of Tōtaranui at Separation Point, some of the park's most remote granite headlands and boulder reaches are home to New Zealand fur seals, or kekeno. They return to these rocky shores every breeding season, typically from November to January. But no matter how adorable the pups are, you must keep your distance. Visitors are required to maintain at least 20 metres (66 feet) between themselves and the seals to avoid disturbing or distressing them.

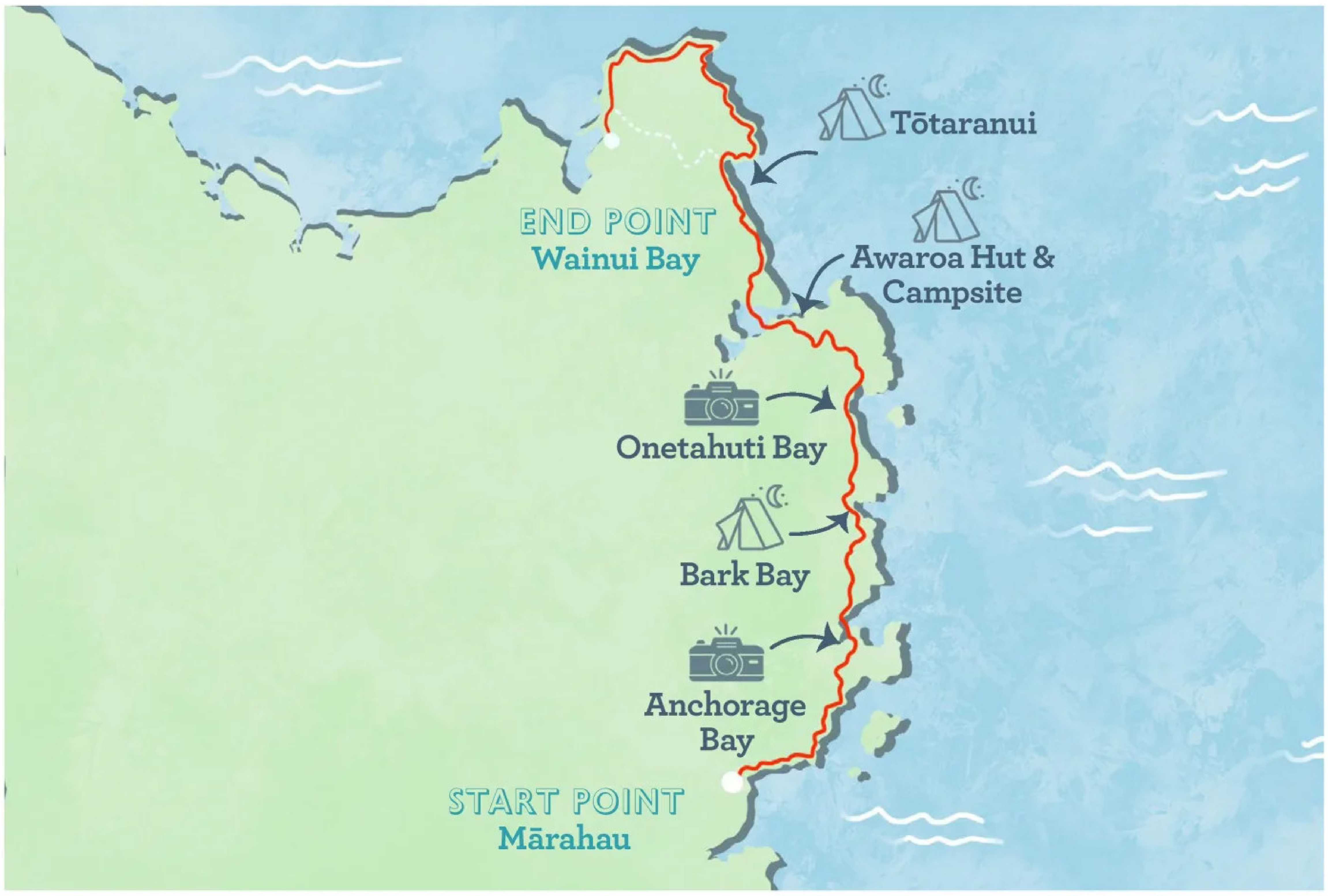
The park is also home to the kororā, otherwise known as little or blue penguins. They're the world's smallest at around 30 centimetres (12 inches) tall. Between May and June, they waddle ashore to molt and breed, building nests in underground


Anchorage Bay is a stunning, curved stretch of golden beach, wrapped in a cloud of greenery

burrows, hidden beneath foliage or in crevices. However, they are notoriously shy, and tend to only come ashore at night – if they are spotted, more often than not it is while they are swimming.

Following the trail eastwards around the north coast, visitors can spend the night at Whariwharangi Hut, a historic homestead originally built in the 1890s. The surrounding land was farmed until 1972, and it was among the park's last to be returned to the earth. Today the restored farmhouse sits atop a grassy clearing in regenerating bush.

The last stretch of the journey, from Whariwharangi Bay, traverses a glistening stream to a saddle looking over the Wainui Inlet. The Abel Tasman Coast Track ends at Wainu Bay, but from here hikers have the option of climbing the picturesque Gibbs Hill to cut back through to Tōtaranui, where water taxis wait to carry tired legs and happy hearts back to Mārahau.


Tōtaranui
END POINT
Wainui Bay
Awaroa Hut & Campsite
Onetahuti Bay
Bark Bay
Anchorage Bay
START POINT
Mārahau

© Getty Images, Alamy

> "CROSSING OVER THE AWAROA INLET TAKES SOME PLANNING"

AUSTRALIA

GREAT OCEAN WALK

Forget driving the Great Ocean Road – Victoria's alternative trail will be sure to exercise your legs

104km/65mi 7-8 days Moderate Point to Point 2,553m/8,376ft

Stretched over a stunning coastal landscape some 104 kilometres (65 miles) in length, the Great Ocean Walk is a relatively new hike that's won over a legion of fans. Originally planned in 1974, the idea for a track was shelved until the mid-1990s, when it eventually gained planning approval. Following five years of hard work, the Great Ocean Walk was launched in January 2006, and it's since become one of the must-do trails for anyone interested in nature, history, culture and wildlife.

Starting at Apollo Bay, which is located to the south-west of Melbourne, Australia, the walk comprises a mix of rugged landscapes, beautiful beaches, tremendous rainforest and an area rich with fossils, all leading to the end destination of Twelve Apostles, which is a few miles past Princetown. As you'd expect from a trail that's rather new, it's well-maintained, with great facilities along the way and plenty of places to pitch up and lay down your head.

Within a short time after leaving the seaside village of Apollo Bay, you'll be in the midst of the gorgeous Great Otway National Park that flanks much of the route. Hugging the coastline as best it can and often running parallel to the Great Ocean Road, the track will take you through picturesque Shelly Beach, which, as the name suggests, is full of small shells leading to a sea that can be inviting during calm conditions. You'll cross Elliot River having enjoyed walking through sheltered forests, reaching Elliot Ridge before heading inland on wide roads through towering forests and back to the coast to Blanket Bay where you can safely swim. Watch out for koalas and wallabies, which are always a delight and, after a rest, head on to Cape Otway.

Victoria's oldest working lighthouse is located along the Great Ocean Walk

Along the way, as you meander along the cliff tops, there are some small adventures to be had. At Parker Inlet, you may need to whip off your walking boots and cross a tidal creek, and there are wildlife to keep an eye out for, including black cockatoos and echidnas. One of the main features of Cape Otway is mainland Australia's oldest surviving lighthouse, which will give you amazing views over the ocean. It was built in 1848 at the start of a stretch known as the Shipwreck Coast that runs for about 130 kilometres (81 miles) – the area is littered with wrecks going back almost 200 years – and its bright-white exterior is a strangely compelling sight. It's just a shame the first operator didn't always have his eye on things since, in his drunken state, he'd often forget to shine the light.

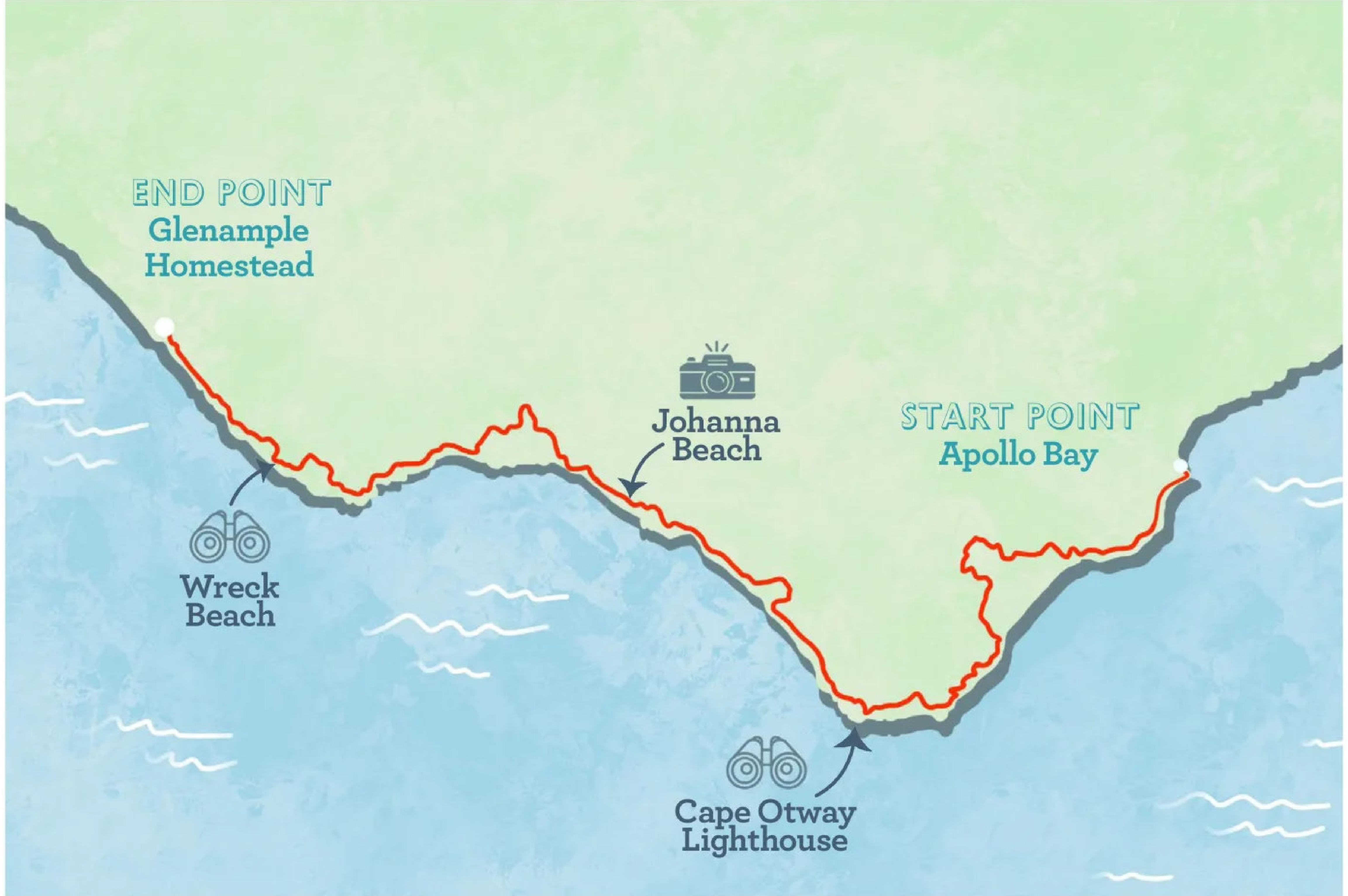
Man-made objects are less thrilling than the diverse landscapes that will surely take your breath away, though. There are

The Gables are one of the natural highlights of this trail

sand dunes, calcified cliffs and acres of vegetation, as well as stretches of water such as Aire River, over which the Great Ocean Walk crosses close to its mouth. You'll veer towards the coast, then go inland and back, sometimes climbing and often bumping into something significant – a few dinosaur fossils were discovered near Castle Cove in the 1980s, for example, which led to Victoria's first dinosaur dig.

If you fancy surfing, Johanna Beach is a one-time host of the World Surfing Championships more than 50 years ago, and blessed with perfect left and right breaks. From there, a hilly section will take you to Milanesia Beach, where dinosaur tracks have been preserved in a block of sandstone, and you may want to book a night at the campsite at Ryans Den, which promises stunning ocean views amid eucalyptus trees. Will you spot any southern right whales or fur seals as you peer out to sea?

There's a particularly tricky section of the hike to navigate from this point, with rugged terrain as you walk through Ryans Den towards Devils Kitchen, but then it's a straightforward route to The Twelve Apostles. Here, you can feast your eyes on the seven remaining off-shore limestone stacks that have been formed by erosion due to the extreme weather in this part of the world. At that point, you can finally reflect on the journey you have made. The view from here is also unforgettable.



START POINT
APOLLO BAY

END POINT
GLENAMPLE HOMESTEAD

GETTING THERE

Fly into Melbourne Airport and you could take a train to Geelong before catching a bus to Apollo Bay.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

The route is open all year round, but you might want to avoid the searing heat of summer (in Australia, summer is December to February).

WHAT TO WEAR

Victoria can frequently experience four seasons in a single day, so be prepared and ensure you have weatherproofs and a sun hat.

WHAT TO TAKE

Don't forget the sunscreen and insect repellant in the warm months. Water purification tablets are essential when drinking untreated rainwater collected in tanks.

PIT STOPS

There are very few cafés along the way, so make sure you get enough supplies at Apollo Bay to last to Cape Otway, where you can refill.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

There are seven campsites along this trail, but you will need to book beforehand. You also need to register with Parks Victoria.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.greatoceanwalk.com.au
www.greatoceanwalk.info
www.thegreatoceanwalk.com

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NEW ZEALAND

TONGARIRO ALPINE CROSSING

Go extra-terrestrial on the planet's finest one-day trek

19.4km/12.1mi
7 hours
Moderate
Point to Point
844m/2,769ft

START POINT
MANGATEPOPO CAR PARK

END POINT
KETETAHI CAR PARK

GETTING THERE

Tongariro is a four-hour drive from Auckland or Wellington. Once at the site, shuttle buses transport walkers from one car park to another.

WHEN TO TRAVEL

November to April to avoid snow and ice.

WHAT TO WEAR

Plenty of layers since the temperature fluctuates.

WHAT TO TAKE

Sunscreen since there is very little cover.

PIT STOPS

There are toilets at both car parks, Soda Springs and Ketetahi shelter. Take toilet paper!

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

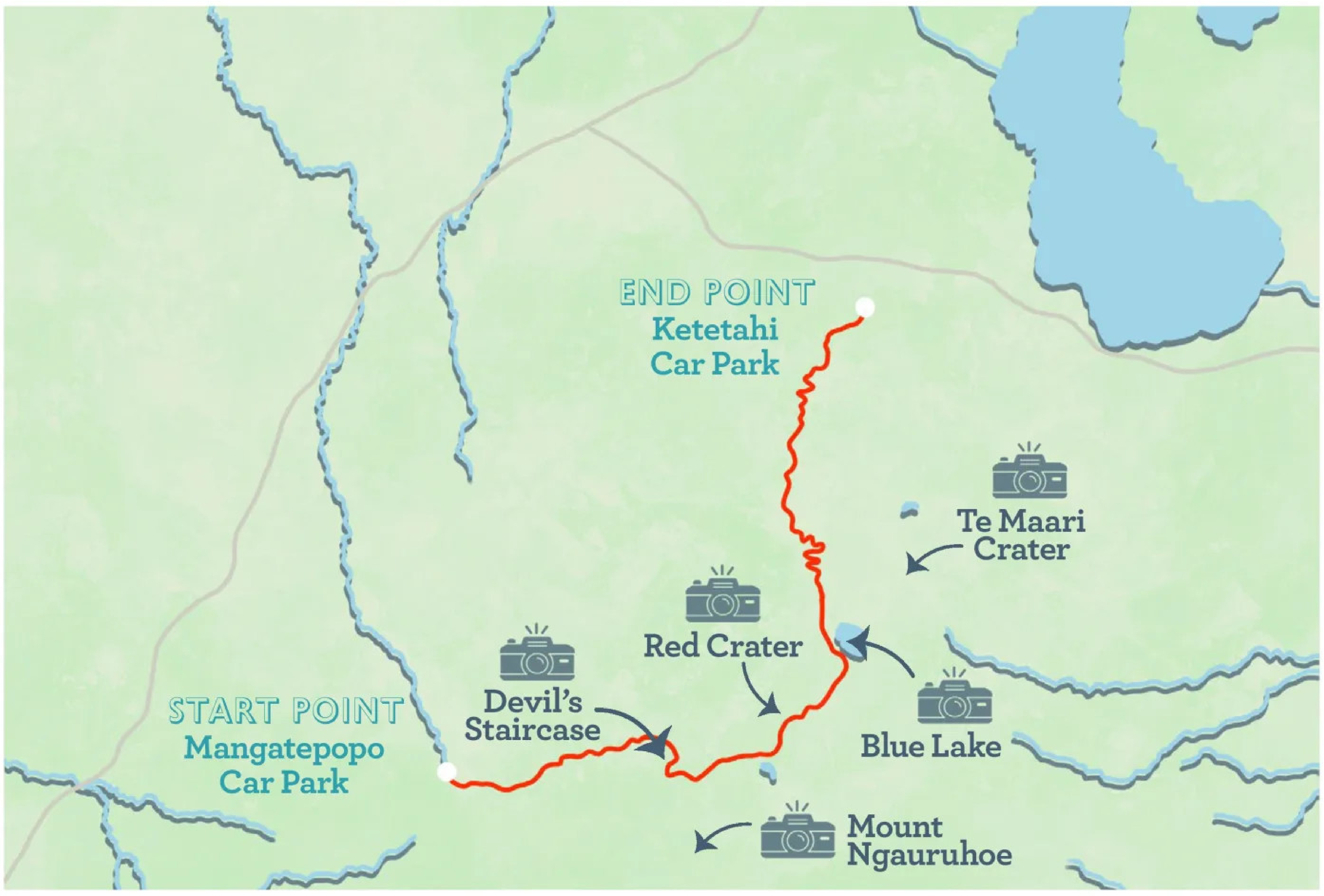
There are plenty of lodges in the villages around Tongariro National Park.

USEFUL WEBSITES

tongarirocrossing.org.nz
nationalpark.co.nz/activity/tongariro-alpine-crossing
tongarirocrossingshuttles.co.nz

Only 12 astronauts have ever walked on the Moon, but countless others have trekked across Earth's nearest equivalent to the lunar landscape: Tongariro National Park. The 19.4-kilometre (12.1-mile) path across Mount Tongariro on New Zealand's North Island is described by many as the finest one-day hike in the world.

Most commonly walked from Mangatepopo to Ketetahi in order to provide a point-to-point descent of 360 metres (1,181 feet), the first few kilometres are fairly flat as the trail heads up a glacial valley partially filled in by lava flows. Keep an eye on the colour of the rock; darker usually means newer. A short side track to where Soda Springs bubbles to the surface reveals an oasis of buttercups in a bare environment where few other plants thrive, but don't be tempted to drink the water. It contains unhealthy levels of minerals picked up from



Get on the trail early for the chance of an awesome sunrise over the volcanic landscape

"BLOCKS AS LARGE AS ONE METRE WERE SENT CRASHING ACROSS THE PATH"

the volcanic rock the water passes through on its way to the surface.

Mount Ngauruhoe lurks menacingly to the side, a dark stratovolcano with almost perfectly straight sides and a missing tip. So imposing is Ngauruhoe that it was perfectly cast as Mount Doom in the *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. Perhaps its ominous character derives from the fact that Ngauruhoe typically erupts every nine years but the last was in 1975. Mount Doom is either slowly dying as its vent becomes blocked, or it is overdue an eruption. Only time will tell.

The trail climbs 340 metres (1,115 feet) up the steep Devil's Staircase to the upper reaches of Mount Tongariro, which, unlike Ngauruhoe, is still alive and kicking. The terrain is tough going. The path crosses two solidified lava flows from an eruption in 1870, and two pyroclastic flows from 1975. Volcanic bombs and loose fragments have left a surface that is anything but smooth. Minerals have stained the rocks a brown-red colour and there is no vegetation. In 2007, the trail path was renamed the Tongariro Alpine Crossing (from the tamer Tongariro Crossing) to emphasise the difficulty of the exposed terrain and its changeable, extreme weather. Although the route is not technically difficult, there are plenty of signs reminding people to stay within their physical capabilities and to ensure they have adequate clothing, food and water.

The trail undulates across the top of the volcano, past South Crater (actually a glacial basin) to Red Crater, the highest point on the trek at 1,886 metres (6,187 feet), with panoramic views across Tongariro National Park and down to Lake Taupo. The strange, finger-like protrusions in the crater are a dike, formed when magma squeezed through a vertical channel in the crater wall and solidified before being exposed to the elements as the rock around it eroded. The path is covered in thick dirt and gravel with a drop-off on either side. Some walkers choose to pick their way down the loose shingle, while the more carefree slide through the gravel as though skiing, and get to the bottom in no time at all.

The trail descends past more craters that have filled with rainwater to create the Emerald Lakes. The strange hue of the water is caused by minerals leeching from the rock. Eerie fumaroles spit steam and sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere, leaving a smell in the air that will put even the hungriest of hikers off their packed lunch.

The descent from the summit crosses Central Crater then passes the stunning Blue Lake. The lake is Tapu (sacred) so it's disrespectful to touch it, or eat or drink on its shores. It's easy to spot Te Maari Crater from here, since it's likely to be belching plumes of white steam. It was from this crater that the last eruptions occurred in 2012. A shower of ash shot 4,000 metres (13,123 feet) into the air and sent blocks as large as one metre (3.2 feet) crashing across the path. Thankfully, nobody was injured.

Around seven hours after setting off, the hike is almost over. The tree line marks the end of the Volcanic Hazard Zone, but the Ketetahi shelter – used by walkers on the multi-day Tongariro Northern Circuit – shows damage from debris ejected in the August 2012 eruption. It'll take more than one small step to complete the lunar-esque Tongariro Alpine Crossing, but you'll feel like making a giant leap when you reach the end.

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OCEANIA

BEST OF THE REST

From deep rainforest and jungle to desert and mountaintop, the wild and diverse hiking routes of Oceania are compelling

KOKODA TRACK

Central and Oro provinces, Papua New Guinea

Steeped in history and certainly no undertaking for the novice, the Kokoda Track (also known as the Kokoda Trail) runs for 96km (60mi), sometimes steep and always challenging, through the mountains of the Owen Stanley Range in Papua New Guinea. The scene of an epic struggle between Allied and Japanese forces during World War II, the Kokoda Track is somewhat inhospitable with dense jungle, torrential rainfall, searing heat and sweltering humidity, while its altitude reaches 2,490m (8,170ft) in the vicinity of Mount Bellamy. Enlisting the services of a guide is advised, particularly since the entire journey will take approximately seven days. Despite its challenges, the Kokoda Track offers fabulous rewards. Memorials to the men who fought there years ago punctuate its length, and the trek runs inland from the southeastern coast of Papua New Guinea, allowing visitors to experience the tribal culture of the Mountain Koiari people in several locales. Further, the variety of natural beauty found in the surrounding landscape is seldom seen elsewhere. Prime season is spring through to autumn.

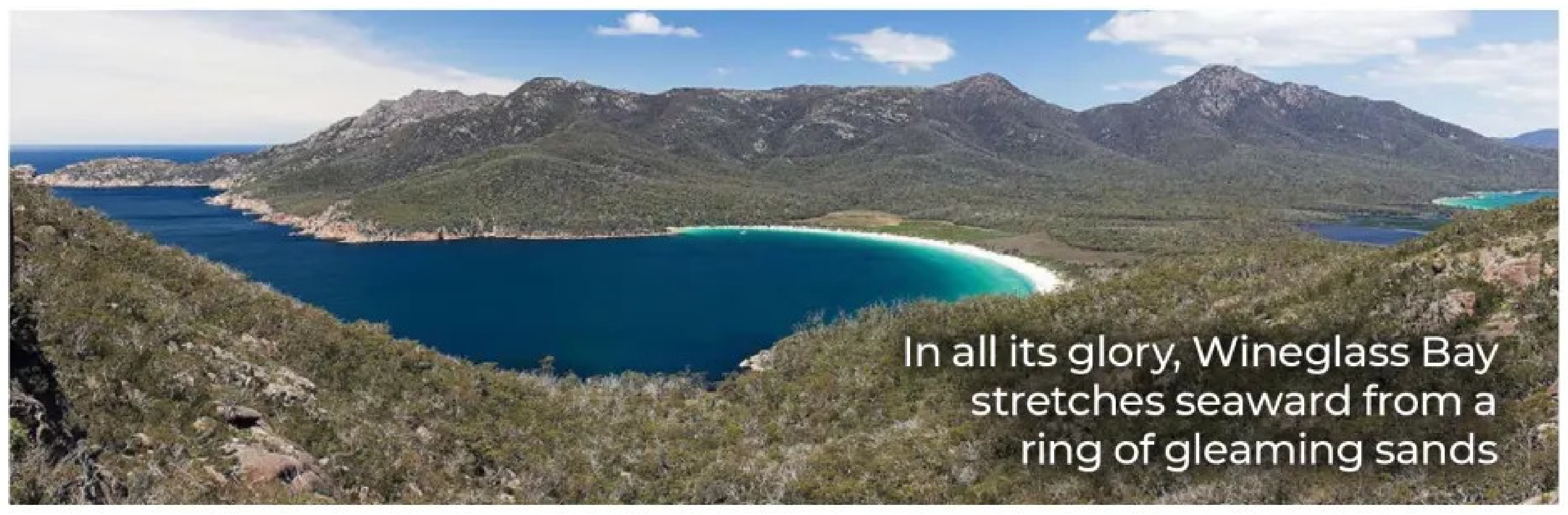
This steep incline is typical of the terrain encountered along the Kokoda Track

© WIKI/ Jontycrane

WINEGLASS BAY AND HAZARDS BEACH CIRCUIT

Tasmania, Australia

Located within the boundaries of Freycinet National Park, the moderately strenuous Wineglass Bay and Hazards Beach Circuit traverses 11km (7mi), and the round trip requires approximately five hours to complete. Hikers set off along a paved route that evolves rapidly into a dusty pathway through the native bush. Within a few minutes, the trail inclines somewhat, a prelude to beautiful views of nearby Coles Bay. Soon, stepping-stone stairs lead to Wineglass Bay Lookout, where a stunning panoramic vista awaits. Proceeding along a boardwalk toward Hazards Beach, hikers often linger to take in the azure-blue ocean. The loop is dotted by quiet coves and rocky outcrops. Be prepared for extremes in weather conditions, particularly temperatures that may vary significantly during the hike.



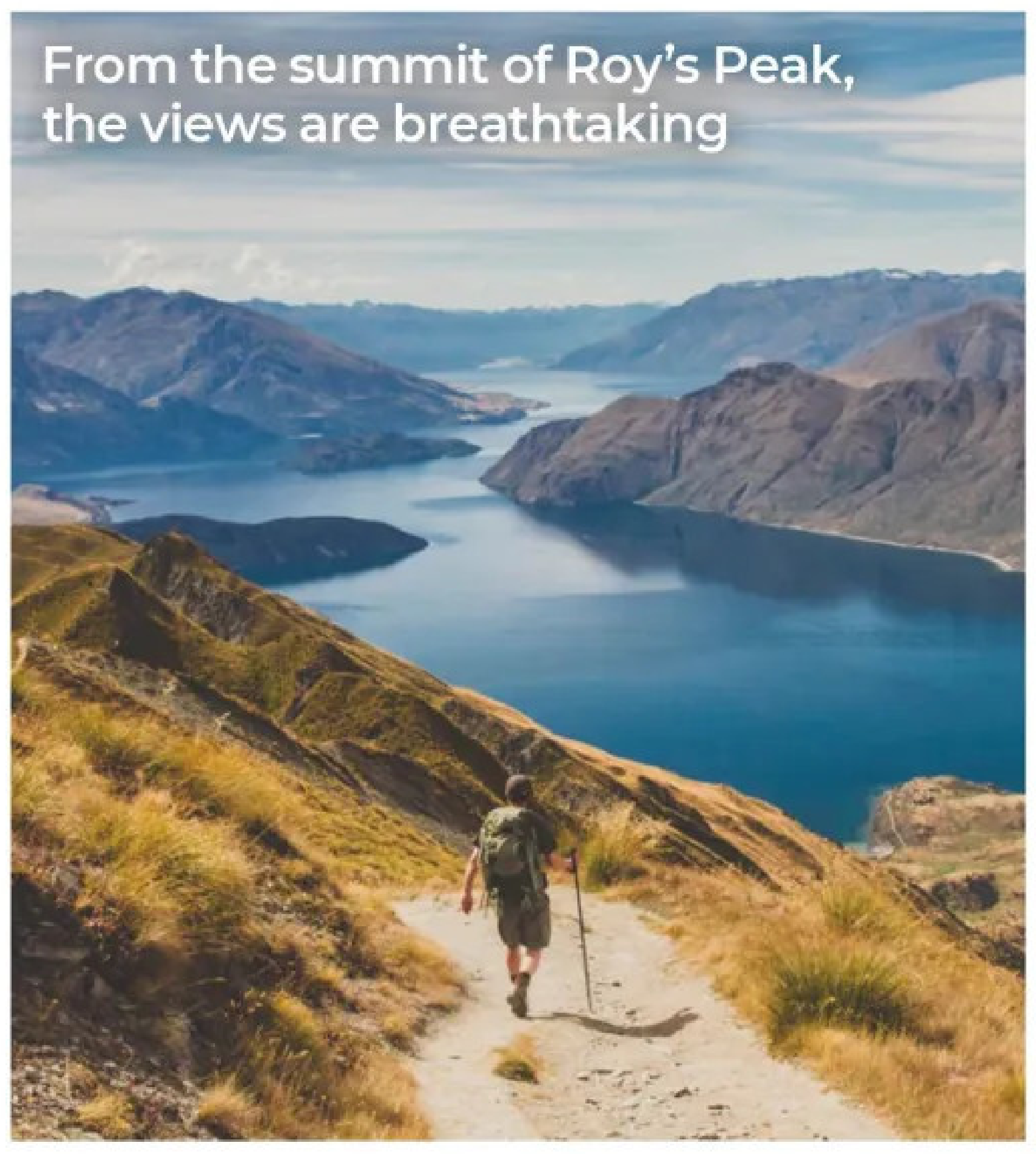
In all its glory, Wineglass Bay stretches seaward from a ring of gleaming sands

© WIKI/ JJ Harrison

ROY'S PEAK

South Island, New Zealand

Near the resort town of Wanaka in the Otago region of South Island, New Zealand, hikers find a strenuous challenge to reach the summit of Roy's Peak and the rewarding vistas of Lake Wanaka that await. The hike begins through two sheep-grazing yards while passing four fences to the start of a difficult ascent that crosses an extensive ridgeline, which affords great opportunities for photographs. Continuing along the 16km (10mi) route, the elevation steadily increases from approximately 340m (1,115ft) to the 1,578m (5,180ft) summit, and the grade steepens from nine to 23 degrees. Those so inclined may take advantage of numerous shortcuts for an abbreviated climb and ease the difficulty of their outing, but pressing forward to the top results in a stunning view of the opposite side of the mountain and a sweeping vista of Lake Wanaka below. Proceeding toward to a more distant white marker allows the hiker to gaze further down the adjacent valley.



From the summit of Roy's Peak, the views are breathtaking

© Getty Images

The Larapinta Trail will take you past the picturesque Ellery Creek Big Hole waterhole

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LARAPINTA TRAIL

Northern Territory, Australia

Extending 223km (139mi) east to west from Alice Springs to Mount Sonder in the Northern Territory of Australia, the Larapinta Trail is one of the finest arid zone walks anywhere in the world. Although the trail is well marked, it traverses the West MacDonnell Ranges (Tjoritja), in and out of West MacDonnell National Park, and encompasses some of the most inhospitable terrain the planet has to offer. During the summer months, temperatures regularly soar above 45°C (113°F), and much of its course is quite remote. Sufficient water is a necessity for anyone attempting the length of trek. Crossing the entire Larapinta Trail might easily require 16 to 20 days to complete at a reasonable pace, and prearranged food and provision drops are required. Divided into 12 sections, each marked with informational notice boards, the Larapinta Trail follows an extensive ridgeline for much of its length. Numerous sacred sites of the indigenous Arrernte people are located along the way, as well as natural features such as Serpentine Gorge, Ellery Creek Big Hole, and Glen Helen Gorge.

SIX WATERFALLS HIKE

Pohnpei, Caroline Islands, Federated States of Micronesia

The island of Pohnpei is the largest of the Senyavin archipelago within the greater Caroline Islands of the Federated States of Micronesia, and also home to the dazzling but strenuous Six Waterfalls Hike, a 5.2km (3.2mi), six- to eight-hour round trip over rugged terrain through the lush Nanmeir Valley near the village of Salapwuk. At times, the footpath narrows and stretches across an undulating landscape. Much of the trail winds along the banks of the Sihngar Stream, and each waterfall – Pahnairlap, Nikotoapw, Olotong, Iro, Nan Emp and Lipwentiak – is a wonder in itself. Guides are reasonably priced, and hikers are advised to bring at least two litres (four pints) of water. The area is prone to sudden heavy rain, which often leads to flash floods, so it is advisable to check a reliable weather report before setting off.

The sparkling cascade of Nikotoapw is one of the jewels along the Six Waterfalls Hike

© Alamy

MONT AORAI SUMMIT TRAIL

Tahiti, French Polynesia

One of the tallest peaks in French Polynesia, Mont Aorai rises 2,066m (6,778ft) above the island of Tahiti in French Polynesia. Papeete, the capital city of French Polynesia, is a good base of operations for this strenuous hike. Although the trail is clear for the first 1,000m (3,280ft), thick jungle and dense vegetation present obstacles from there. Compounding the difficulty are the extreme heat and the brushes with large thorns that have a tendency to snag clothing. Nevertheless, the trail is well marked, and remaining oriented is fairly easy. The sloping trail covers about 19km (12mi), and the duration of the round-trip typically exceeds ten hours. No permits are required for the hike, and it's best to start before sunrise to experience the views at the summit before cloud cover closes in.

Wispy clouds swirl around imposing Mont Aorai on the island of Tahiti

© WIKI

MARGARET RIVER CAPE TO CAPE WALK

Western Australia

The exhilarating Margaret River Cape to Cape Walk along Western Australia's Leeuwin-Naturaliste Ridge is a perfect combination of sweeping ocean views, golden sandy beaches and sheltered forest. The 123km (76mi) route can be tackled in individual sections as half-day and day hikes, but those up for an adventure can take on the entire length of the trail, which runs between the lighthouses at Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin, both about a three-hour drive from Perth. The entire cape-to-cape trail will take about five to eight days, depending on your pace. Some parts of the route can be very steep with rough terrain, so having previous bushwalking experience is an advantage. There are plenty of nearby accommodation options along the trail; whether you prefer camping or a luxury retreat, there'll be something suitable.

At the north trailhead, Cape Naturaliste has stunning views of the Indian Ocean

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Words: Mike Haskew

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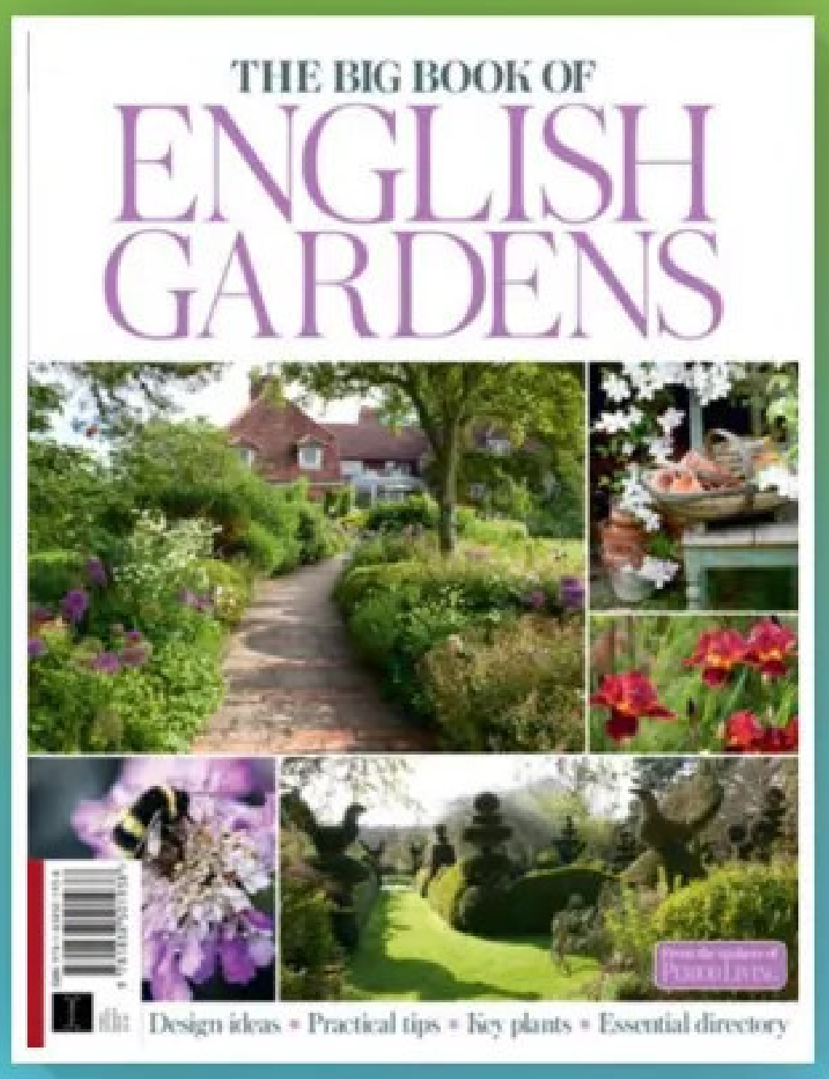
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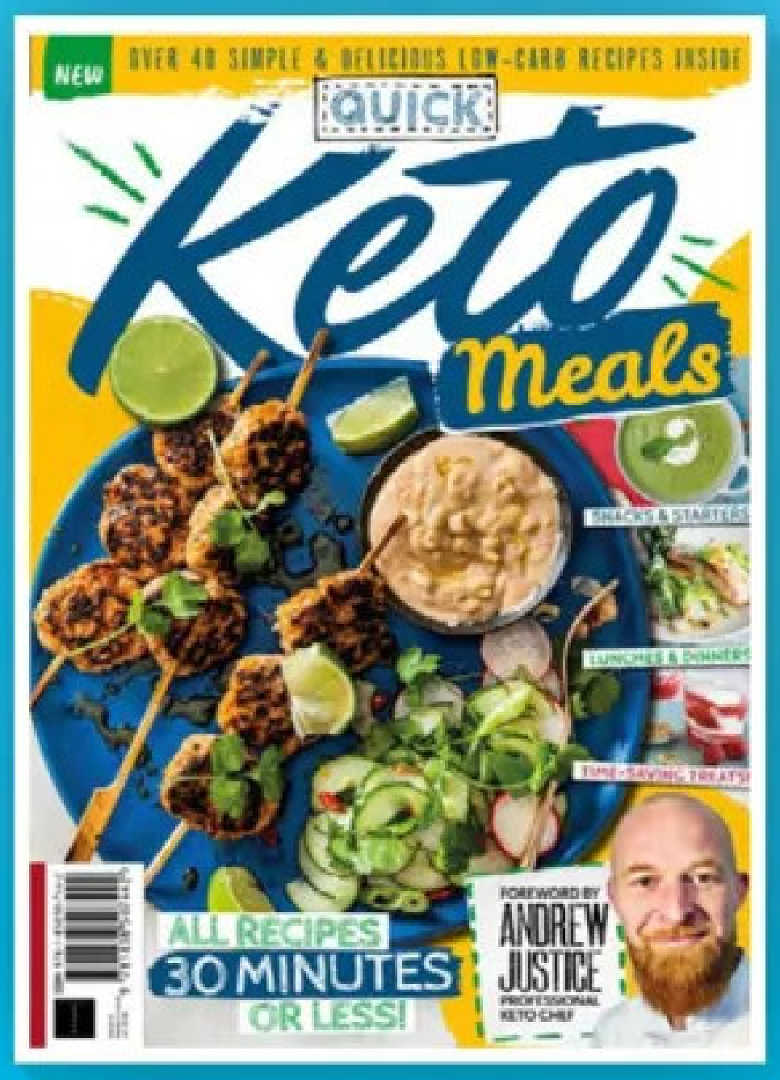
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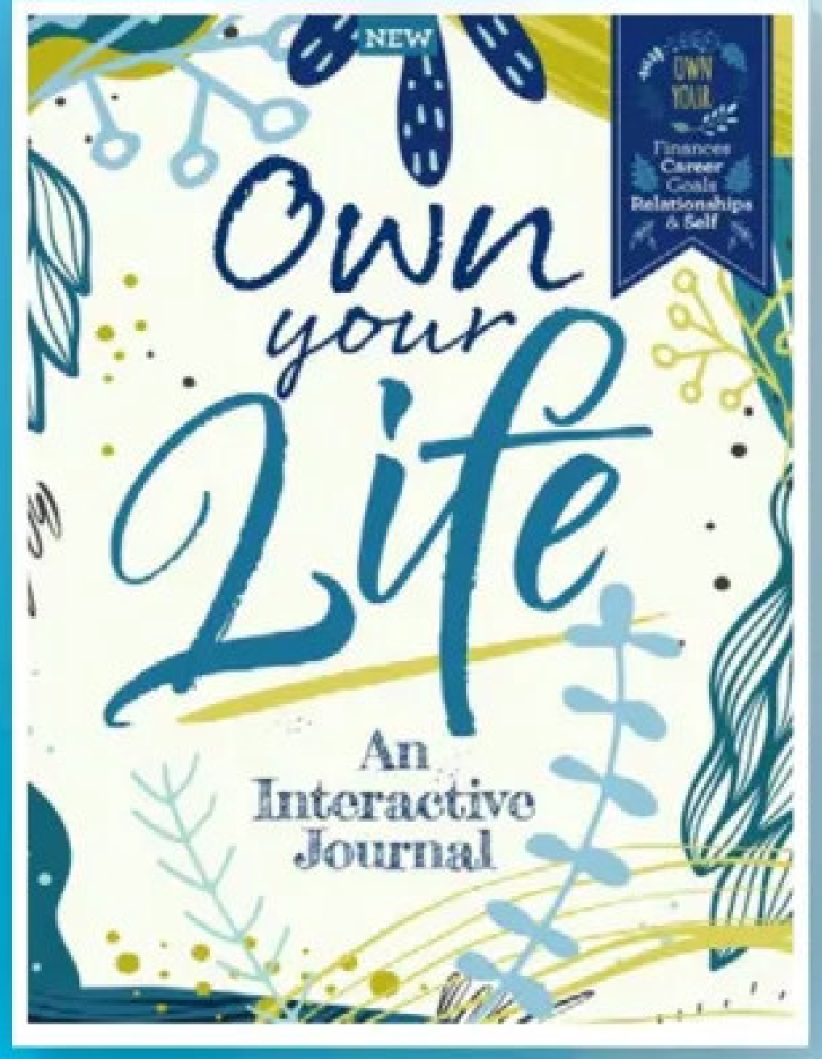
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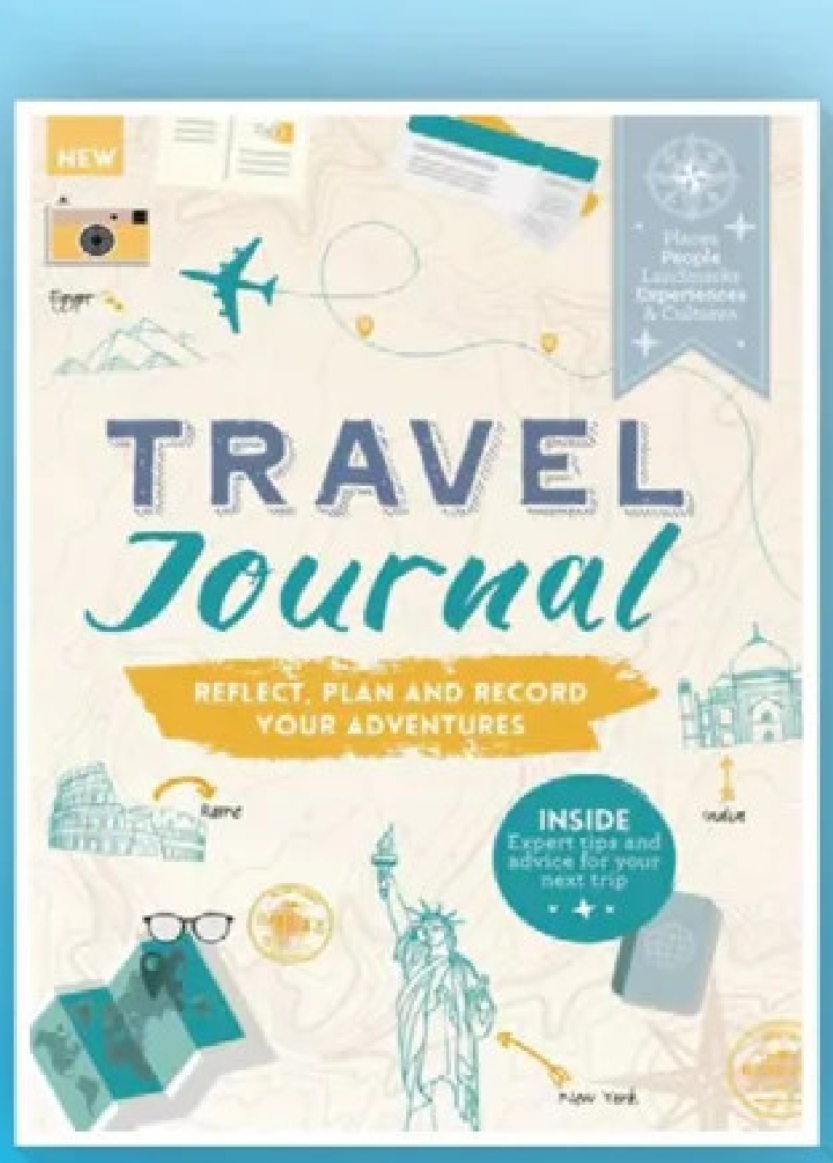
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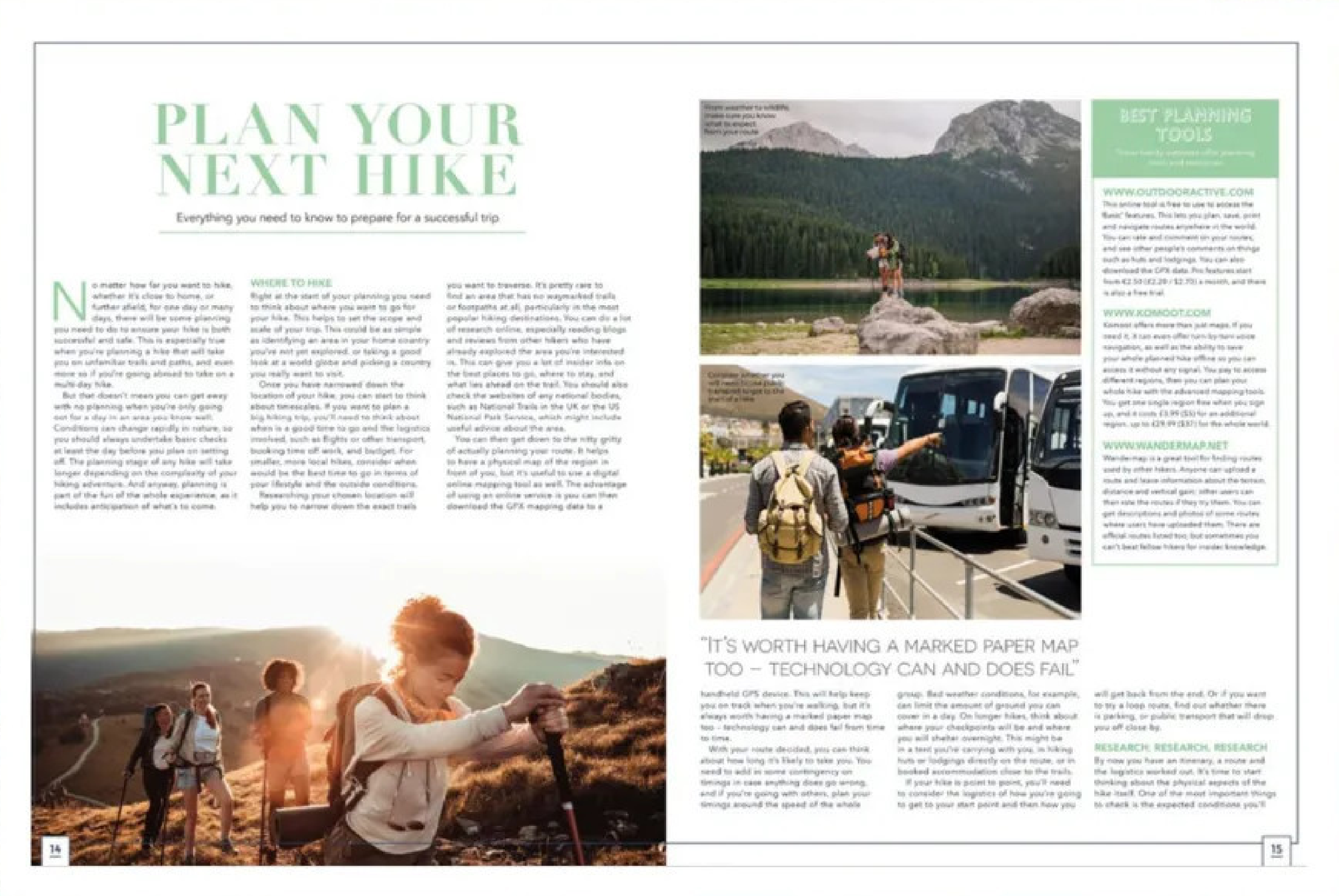
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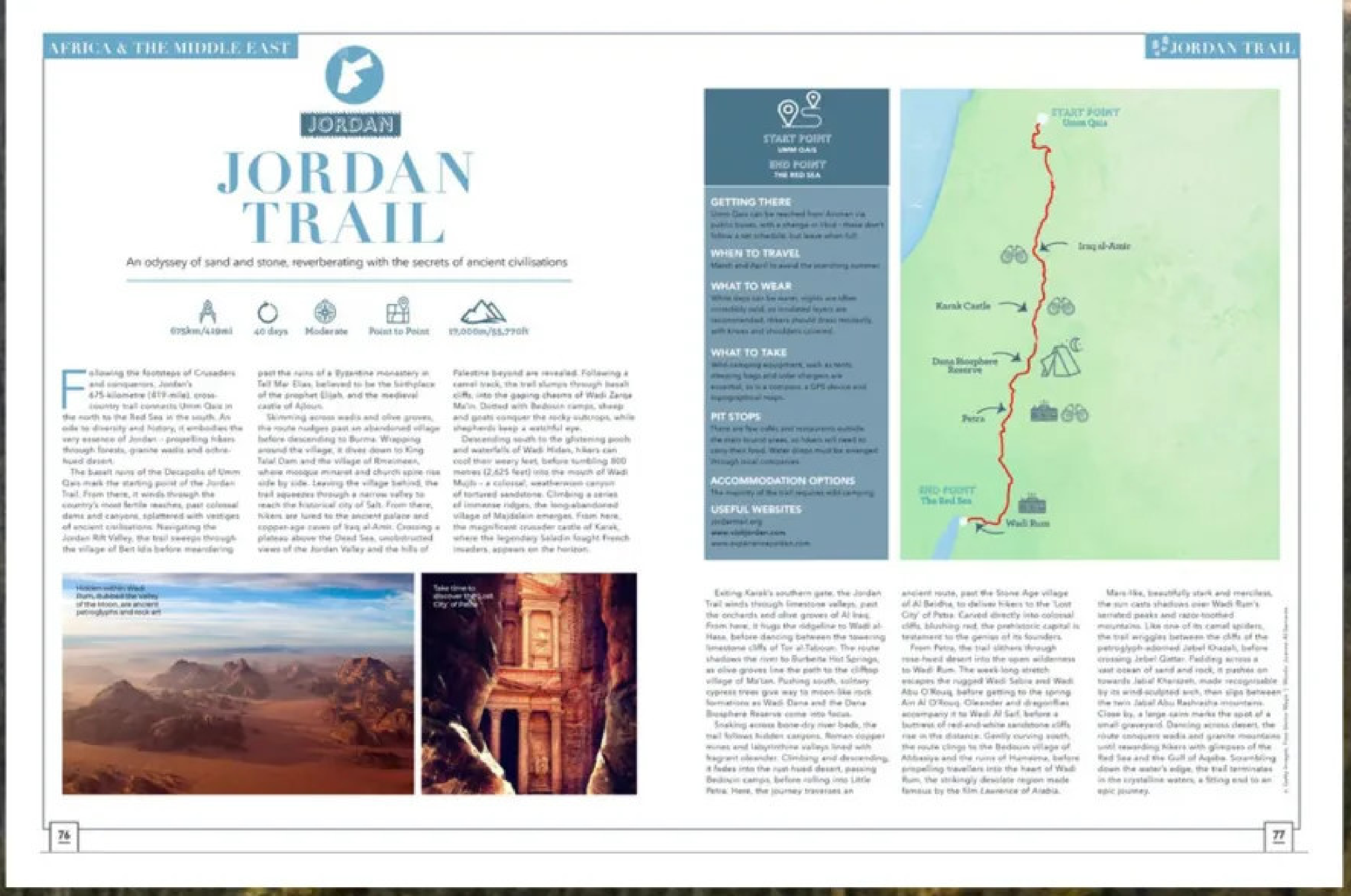
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